
Madan no Ou to Vanadis Volume 03 Preview

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 3



魔王の戦姫

ヴァナディース

川口士
Illustration よし☆ラ

Black Knight

To the west of Brune Kingdom lay the Kingdoms of Sachstein and Asvarre.

The primary relation between the neighboring countries was one of discord. There were frequent skirmishes, especially with Sachstein.

Though the lands to the west held barren wilderness and steep mountains, there was no King who resisted the thought of expanding his lands. While using childish reasons to fight, the results would be obvious with victory.

And so, the fighting along the western border did not end. Five, six years ago, Sachstein was defeated.

The one to lead the defense of the western border was Roland, the [Black Knight].

Three thousand soldiers roamed the barren wilderness which was devoid even of weeds. Present on a flag hoisted above was the symbol of Furesburg. It was said

the souls of the dead would be sent to heaven in peace by this entity, and it was the symbol of the Kingdom of Sachstein.

They were the Sachstein Army. They had passed the border and were currently invading Brune.

One thousand cavalry stood at the front followed by two thousand infantry.

Behind them rang the shrill sound of oxen and horse-driven caravans and catapults. Many towers and boulders were visible.

As they left the wilderness, the Sachstein Army entered a mountain path surrounded by cliffs.

A single horseman appeared before them.

His helmet, boots, and waving mantle were solid black. In his hand was a large, deep black sword. A dignity exuded from his very presence.

“Sachstein, it seems you have not learned the strength of this country or land from your prior experiences. I will do nothing should you choose to flee!”

The sonorous voice of the Black Knight echoed through the desolate mountain path. Rather than anger, soldiers from the Sachstein Army held fear.

“That's Roland.”

With a force of three thousand, it was foolish to stand before them as a lone soldier.

However, the Sachstein Army knew. This knight easily had the power to match one thousand.

Many Knights and Generals fighting beneath the Sachstein banner had lost their lives in the past five years. The common soldiers did not understand that.

The Sachstein Army did not respond to Roland. A single horseman, covered in heavy armor, advanced carrying a spear with both hands.

The man brandished the spear and made his horse run forward silently. Roland unsheathed his sword as he kicked the belly of his horse. Roland held the sword aloft, a large blade which would be difficult to wield with both hands by a common man, with his right hand alone.

The distance between the two shrunk quickly, a sound similar to thunder shook the atmosphere.

The Sachstein cavalryman in blue armor facing Roland slumped over.

His red corpse fell to the ground, his blood soaking the dry earth. A groan sounded from the Sachstein Army.

Roland did not stop his horse. He charged at the enemy brandishing his large sword, wet with blood. Crushed by fear, a cry was heard from the troops of Sachstein. The man nicknamed after the God of War pounced on the enemy as a single horseman.

“May the God of War, Tyulare, grant us protection!”

Two amongst the Sachstein cavalry rapidly approached Roland, thrusting toward him from the left and right. The next moment, their spears passed through empty space; their necks hovered in midair above a trail of fresh blood.

Every time Roland swung his sword, the blood and a scream of a Sachstein soldier appeared. Countless corpses fell to the earth, releasing unknown amounts of blood.

Though infantrymen rained arrows upon him, Roland used his large sword to cut two arrows, while three bounced off his jet-black armor.

Roland showed no fatigue, no matter how often he cut, nor did his sword become dull. Even when surrounded by four or five people, not a single scratch marred his armor; rather, only the dead bodies of Sachstein soldiers littered the field.

Suddenly, a battle cry was heard atop the cliff. A Knight dressed in armor carried a flag depicting a horse head; it was the symbol of Brune fluttering in the wind. They were the Navarre Knights who defended the western border.

The Sachstein Army, having focused on Roland, failed to notice the soldiers surrounding them. Even if they killed Roland, they would be overrun.

The Knights of Navarre ran down the steep slope together. With Roland at the lead, the Sachstein Army collapsed. The cavalry turned their horses around, and the infantrymen began to flee.

Roland joined the Knights of Navarre.

“Did we come too early?”

Leading the Knights, speaking to Roland with a smile, was a slim man. He was the Roland's right hand man, Olivier, who served as Vice-Commander. As Roland tried to respond, the Sachstein forces began to flee.

The air swelled. Boulders, likely pulled along by five or six men, flew near Roland, destroying the earth beside him.

“--- A catapult.”

He was surprised. Roland soothed his horse as he muttered fearlessly. His face betrayed no sign of amazement or impatience.

“What's with that. That thing is for a castle siege.”

Another boulder was launched. It hit the wall and landed with a heavy noise. The Knights avoided the rock in a panic.

Roland held his large sword high and ran forward on his horse.

“Follow my sword!”

The wind sung, and the stones came flying. Roland did not try to avoid them as he moved straight forward with his horse. The boulders could not keep up with the Black Knight's terrific speed.

--- One cut.

Roland's large sword cut a boulder in two. As it landed, it shattered into countless fragments. Cries of astonishment could be heard from the Sachstein soldiers while cries of joy were heard from the Navarre cavalry.

With their spirit gone, the Sachstein Army turned and ran. Roland chased after them, tearing any enemy he caught with his sword.

The soldiers who escaped from Roland could not fend off the blades of the Knights of Navarre who followed

close behind him. Struggling amongst a sea of corpses, the Sachstein soldiers discarded their weaponry and tried to run away.

Roland stopped his chase when the enemy stepped outside the borders.

He ordered a withdrawal and held his sword to the sky. It was a blade the color of steel, decorated with a golden pattern. It boasted a sharpness and strength impossible for normal alloys.

Durandal was its name.

It was called the [Sword of Invincibility] in Brune. Roland was granted the sword from the King when entrusted with the defense of the borders.

He was not born of a noble family, and there were objections when he was given the blade at the age of 20. The King merely spoke calmly to any who showed sign of unrest.

“Bring forth a Knight greater than Roland.”

No one could return a word. They remained silent and withdrew.

In fact, Roland had never been defeated once he became a Knight at the age of 13 due to his ability with the sword and spear and his skillful manipulation of a horse. He had spearheaded all his battles.

He wiped the blood off Durandal and leaned it against his shoulder. Roland quietly clicked his tongue.

Why had Sachstein moved at this time?

--- They must have heard our army has fallen into disorder. They definitely sent soldiers to explore.

He became angry upon remembering. It was not Sachstein's attack, but the attack against his land.

--- What are those idiots back in the Royal Palace doing while I protect the borders from the predators outside Brune...!

While Roland waited to lead his Knights, excited over their victory, to their castle, a messenger from the capital, Nice, arrived.

He received the letter presented to him. Roland opened it and read it with a grim countenance.

“--- I understand the situation.”

He folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Roland spoke to the messenger quietly.

“I will head to the capital immediately. Please report to Duke Thenardier.”

The messenger left in a hurry. Roland hid his expression from Olivier, who stood to the side.

“It was a notification to subjugate some thieves.”

“Thieves?”

“Earl Vorn, have you heard of him? He is a man who led a revolt and brought the Army of Zhcted into our country.”

Though Olivier's expression showed his astonishment, he recovered quickly and spoke calmly.

“If we're taking care of this, what about the West?”

Without Roland and Navarre present, Sachstein's suspicion would become certainty. They would quickly attack. That much was easily understandable.

“Duke Thenardier will negotiate for a temporary armistice.”

“Indeed, if it's that man, he could...”

Olivier sounded dissatisfied.

“So, all we need to do is kill Earl Vorn.”

Roland spoke harshly.

Duke Thenardier was preparing to fight against Duke Ganelon. They could not move their soldiers without causing a problem.

“So how many are we bringing?”

Olivier asked his true intent, having heard his response to the messenger. Olivier could not immediately judge the severity.

“The entire army”

Roland responded curtly. Olivier gasped.

“All of Navarre?”

Olivier repeated his question.

“We will empty our fort?”

“Vorn seems to lead a five thousand strong army composed of Zhcted troops. It is said the undefeated Vanadis is a match for one thousand men.”

The names of the seven Vanadis were known even to Olivier and Roland. They were touted as bearing an uncommon bravery and were famed for not knowing defeat on the battlefield.

“It seems we are settling this rumor straight away... We should get within a one koku march and secure victory as quickly as possible. Duke Thenardier will be negotiating desperately, after all.”

Though the Knights of Navarre totaled five thousand, they were by no means average. They were considered amongst the strongest Knights in Brune.

Every day, they were trained in skirmishes at the western border.

Roland, bestowed with the holy sword Durandal by the kingdom, commanded those Knights at the young age of 27.

The next day, Roland drew the Knights to the courtyard.

Tigrevurmud Vorn had invited the Zhcted Army within the country, and there were several nobles aligning themselves with his cause.

“We shall first set off for the Royal Capital; however, our final destination is Territoire.”

Roland returned the [Sword of Invincibility] to its sheath and spoke with a deep voice.

“--- We will quickly attack the enemy and fall back.”

It happened in a dream.

In the dream, Eleanora stood near a river.

Before her eyes stood a beautiful girl; she placed her hand in the river and spoke with a smile. "Nice to meet you, Vanadis of the Silver Flash. I am Alexandra Alshavin. It is a pleasure."

When Ellen was chosen as a Vanadis, her predecessor had already departed from the world.

They met for the first time, perhaps so she could teach what was necessary. Sasha – Alexandra, had deep black hair hanging to her shoulders. She spoke with a masculine tone and gave a strong impression.

Though the two had different personalities, they hit it off immediately, strangely enough. They started referring to each other as Sasha and Ellen on the same day.

"When crisis approaches, when the King commands, you will be bound. You will run to his aid. It is not a promise, it is an oath."

In the dream, the two now sat in a small room.

Sasha, sitting before her, said to be cautious and not to abuse the Dragonic Skill. "It is a force beyond human intellect. If you rely too much on it, you will become mentally weak. Your mind and skill will dull."

Ah, I vaguely remember this memory. It happened two years ago, when I became a Vanadis. This dream is no different from what happened.

"But... Can I really do this with just a strong will?"

"So long as you are confident; however, Ellen, it is not that simple. Remember, you control your will. The blade will not respond to a weak fool."

Ellen tried to object from a different angle, since she did not simply wish to accept what was told to her.

"But if that's the case, I think it would be better to live alone so the soldiers don't die."

Ellen's eyes gazed directly into Sasha's.

"The soldiers will not follow just you, but the
^{Viralt}Dragon^{alt}ic Tool."

--- Jeez, I can't win against Sasha.

Though I understood later, it was not a thought belonging to Sasha alone. Both Sophia and Ludmira had a similar feeling.

“Naturally, when a crisis approaches, I will use my body. There will be times when I can't help but use it to confront an enemy, but there are also times when the simple strength is needed.”

Ludmira spoke as usual. Sophia naturally spoke quietly.

“This is the skill of a dragon. The Vanadis can only exercise such techniques after obtaining a Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool; it is not my own. I will only use it when I have the proper opportunity. When thinking of it that way, it is natural for me.”

Based on what she was told, the Dragonic Tool was used in a manner opposite what she thought. Ellen continued to ask herself and finally came to a conclusion.

Arifal was not a simple sword; it has a will. If it deemed Ellen unworthy, it would immediately part from her hand, though she did not understand how it judged who was and was not qualified.

Currently, Ellen found her own answer.

“I should fight those who challenge me on the battlefield with ingenuity and skill.”

[Cleave the ^{Ley Admos}Wind] was a highly destructive power. It could cleave through the scales of a dragon, protect the Vanadis like iron, and deflect assassin attacks from the shadows. She had experience with it.

Still, it was not necessarily the right answer. Only two years have passed since she became a Vanadis. She worried about failing Arifal's expectations and continued to ask herself such questions.

The early morning sky extended slightly above the clouds, and a cold wind blew the dry grass.

Six thousand soldiers gathered on the west side of Territoire. It consisted of one thousand men from Brune and five thousand from Zhcted. A base was established, and in the center waved the Red Horse^{Bayard} Flag and the Black^{Zirnitra} Dragon Flag.

A large force consisting of troops from two countries was particularly conspicuous

It was divided into a place for the Commanders and another for the Vice-Commanders.

One barrack was set up for men and one for women.

Three girls were in the midst of waking in the women's barracks.

Brune had a relatively mild climate, but it was still quite chilly in the winter morning. Cold air and moisture was evident on the ground. The men wrapped themselves in cloaks of thick fur and blankets. Straw was dried out during the day for use and then burnt as fuel at night.

Amongst the three girls, one was a maid who served Tigrevurmud Vorn, the General leading the troops.

Beneath her chestnut-brown, twin-tail hair was a childish face.

As noiselessly as possible, Teita passed her arms through the sleeves of her black and white maid outfit and left the tent quietly. In the silence, she could occasionally hear the soldiers stifling a yawn.

Wearing a dress and walking in the cold, her breathe was white. She moved about, loosening her body.

--- Tigre-sama must still be asleep.

He was the Lord whom Teita served and whom she intimately thought of. While imagining his sleeping face, she heard a voice from behind her.

“What's this, you're up already.”

After almost jumping up, Teita looked back.

Behind her was a girl with argent hair extending to her waist. At her waist was a sheathed longsword. She had some slightly disordered bed hair.

“Good... morning.”

She bowed and spoke carefully; Teita's expression clearly showed her disappointment.

Her name was Eleanora Viltaria, known as the [Wind Princess of the Silver Flash]^{Silvfrau}. She was one of the seven Vanadis of Zhcted Kingdom, and she and her soldiers were present in the encampment.

As a maid, she was not someone Teita could simply converse with, but she was candidly called out to. Tigre called her by her nickname, Ellen. As Ellen nodded in understanding, she noticed the pail Teita's held.

“Are you going to draw water now?”

Teita felt she was seen through, so she could not help but answer reluctantly.

“I'll go with you.”

“... Thank you.”

Amongst the six thousand strong army, there were only three women: Ellen, Teita, and Ellen's adjutant, Limlisha, who was currently still asleep.

Apart from Ellen and Lim, who held rank, Teita was not called for often. She tried not to act alone as much as possible.

Batran usually accompanied Tigre, but he was likely still asleep this early in the morning.

--- Though if asked, Batran-san will get up immediately.

However, he had taken care of Teita since she was small, She did not want to overdo things.

Thinking about it, she appreciated Ellen's company. Even in an army of six thousand, it was still dangerous to walk alone.

Teita and Ellen walked away from the soldiers on lookout and left the formation toward a narrow river to the north. They passed soldiers who were returning from drawing water. Teita walked silently, so there was no conversation.

--- If this were Tigre-sama.

Teita thought it easy to walk along with Tigre and imagined it.

Tigre's face, still showing signs of not sleeping enough, would walk next to Teita with a yawn. As she washed her smiling face, careful not to fall into the river, Tigre would turn and lightly pat Teita's chestnut-brown hair.

Just remembering the many exchanges they had in the past made Teita happy.

Suddenly, the wind blew. The beginning of winter coldly tickled Teita's neck. She sneezed involuntarily.

“Are you cold?”

Ellen voiced her question. Teita then felt a soft feeling wrap around her shoulders as Ellen took off her mantle and placed it on her.

“Th, thank you.”

Slow in expressing her thanks, Teita looked at Ellen curiously.

“What?”

“You too, aren't you cold?”

She was wearing a long sleeved-shirt that covered her up to her shoulders and her legs. In comparison, Ellen wore a short skirt and had bare legs and shoulders. Still, though not thick, her clothes were made of several fine-quality fabrics.

"I'm fine. The winters in Zhcted are much colder than this."

Teita did not know the weather in the neighboring country, so she could only nod absent-mindedly.

"By the way, Teita, I had a question I wanted to ask you."

"... What could it be?"

Teita's voice was stiff. She prepared herself to respond, no matter what question might come.

"Do you like Tigre?"

The question was far too frank, so it easily pushed past the guard erected in Teita's heart. Teita's now crimson face looked back at Ellen as she shook her hands.

“Wha, what are you suddenly saying...!”

“There's no need to panic. It's not unusual for the maid to have feelings for her Master.

With her hands at her waist, Ellen looked at Teita happily. Teita, in a fluster, tried to protest.

“I am Tigre-sama's maid. Certainly, I have yearned for him for many years, but I do not find our relationship lacking....”

“Is that so. So is there someone he likes?”

Ellen moved on to the next question without hesitation. Without going further into Teita's thoughts, she shook her another way.

“I do not believe so. I have never seen nor heard of a woman frequently meeting with Tigre-sama.”

“He may be a 16 year old like me, but he's a noble with a territory, right? There haven't been any stories?”

Ellen showed some doubt in her face. Even if they were only 16, it was not abnormal to think of marriage. Furthermore, Tigre was not some youth on the streets.

He had an obligation to continue his blood to prevent the eradication of the Vorn family line.

“Tigre-sama is a serious person.”

Teita spoke proudly, as if speaking for herself, though it did not last long.

“Though you say he's serious, he could still be interested in women. He seemed interested when he saw me naked.”

“... Naked?”

“I was bathing at a well.”

Ellen responded casually. Teita could not articulate naturally for a while. When she was young, she did not mind being seen naked, but, of course, that changed when she became aware of her femininity.

“Don't put on a face like that. He didn't come to see me , it was more of an accident.”

Was Teita's reaction really that odd? Ellen looked at her, nearly laughing. The chestnut-brown haired maid looked into the eyes of the Vanadis with reproach.

Though mortifying, she did not have the reckless courage to show her bare skin to Tigre.

... Besides....

Looking at Ellen's body, she sighed inwardly. Though Teita's body was not unattractive, she could not match Ellen's bust size or thin hips.

They continued walking when a question suddenly appeared in Teita's head.

“--- Why are you worried about this?”

Ellen walked next to her, looking at her curiously. Teita made her question more direct.

“You as well, do you like Tigre-sama?”

Ellen's straight face turned rigid. Her wide eyes gazed at Teita. The wind fluttered through her argent hair, bringing her back to her senses.

“That's right. Well, I don't hate him, I guess....”

Ellen's fingers fiddled with her hair. Teita gently pushed forward.

“...So you like him?”

Ellen frowned slightly and crossed her arms.

“Liking him and not disliking him, it's not really that simple.”

“Certainly, but I believe I can apply that to you.”

Teita's words would not permit running away, forcing a small moan to leak from Ellen. Withdrawing her gaze and placing her hand on her longsword, she gently patted it as if touching the head of a small animal. As if in response, the wind of the Silver Flash lightly blew.

“Assuming I like Tigre as you say, what will you do?”

“That...I do not know, but---”

While overlooking the meadows, which were mostly a dull yellow, Teita continued to speak. It was not something she had thought much about.

“I am happy enough, so long as I can see Tigre-sama smiling happily, and, right now, you are necessary for that.”

She hardened her determination and stopped walking. Teita looked back at Ellen. With her face flushed, she looked strongly with her hazel eyes.

“That is why, I will remain by Tigre-sama from now on, and I will watch you. I will not forgive you should you do anything terrible to him!”

Teita understood. All Tigre needed were peaceful days

He needed the soldiers to fight Duke Thenardier, an excellent leader, and food and water to maintain them.

Ellen could prepare them all, it was something Teita could not do.

Ellen was more necessary for Tigre in private as well.

It was precisely because she understood that she said nothing more.

Though Ellen looked at Teita in surprise, she burst out in laughter hearing the desires of the maid, one year her junior.

“Wha, what is so funny?”

Teita drew closer, strongly clutching the pail. Ellen smiled bitterly and shook her hands.

“No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make fun of your determination.”

Though she was envious of Teita's single-minded and brave nature, she could not say it aloud.

“I'm one of the seven Vanadis. Even if he liked me, we would just be too unbalanced.”

“Unbalanced....”

Though relieved, Teita had an expression showing her mixed feelings. Though it was her selfish desire, there was also an imbalance between them.

Though she was not necessarily seen through, Ellen looked at Teita with happy, bright red eyes.

“I wouldn't mind, but would you try to become his mistress? He's mine. There won't be anything interfering with us getting together.”

“No thank you!”

While Teita had spoken with a large voice and a crimson face before, she now turned her back to Ellen indignantly. She was being teased, but was surprised to hear of herself as a mistress. --- *Tigre-sama, what should I do?*

She had just told Ellen she would remain by Tigre's side.

However, seeing her and Lim, she was acutely aware of how little she could help.

Of course, it was a misunderstanding. Teita's role was not in the realm of warfare. She took care of personal needs, prepared delicious meals, and readied the warm beds for the tired individuals in the evening.

She was modest, to say the least. She did not understand the result of her actions. She never thought to ask Tigre.

“May I ask you one more question?”

“Ah, yes?”

With a question suddenly thrown at her, Teita panicked.

She felt a force weigh down on her.

Her heart beat rapidly, and even her breathing stopped as Ellen watched her. Because she was told to give up so suddenly, this silver-white princess was not being careless. Ellen, her red eyes shining curiously, asked Teita happily.

“What part of Tigre do you like?”

“Ah, Everything!”

“Even his habit of oversleeping?”

Teita found herself at a loss for words. To disentangle the heart of the maid, younger by one year, Ellen spoke with a smile.

“I don't doubt your feelings, but as someone who has been by his side for years, I'm curious. What are his virtues, and what are his faults?”

Was it different from what Ellen found in Tigre?

“His gentle nature....”

“What else?”

When asked, Teita stopped her feet and looked up at the clouds in the sky.

“...I will tell you what Batran-san once said.”

Little by little, Teita formed her words.

“Tigre-sama has ruled the widely spread land of Alsace alone.”

Ellen wore a dubious face when she heard it called wide, but was immediately convinced.

Celesta, the city in the center of Alsace, was a place the maid rarely stepped foot out of. To her, Alsace must have been extraordinarily wide.

“When he became Lord, Tigre was a simple child, no different from any other. There were many who looked poorly upon him, though they were never angry. Still, I think it amazing.”

After a single breath, Ellen nodded silently, encouraging her to continue.

“He lost his father, attended the funeral, and, with no time to rest, became Lord. He had many people to help and worked many days without rest...however, Tigre-sama himself never changed. Thanks to that, I could continue to feel at ease with him.”

Tigre became Earl and succeeded his territory at the age of 14. He did not take time to mourn for his father and immediately took up his duties. Even so, there was pain, suffering, and conflict.

Still, Tigre's attitude did not change, touching the lives of Teita, Batran, and many others.

“When I saw that, I wanted to help Tigre-sama, even just a little.”

“...I see.”

Ellen nodded in satisfaction hearing Teita's words. Her silver-white hair fluttered in the wind.

... Certainly, he's a very flexible person.

He doesn't let a situation pass, but he's not too self-assertive

.

--- It's hard, as a woman, to tell if he's suitable or unsuitable

.

She could only smile bitterly as she reflected upon Teita's story as well as her and Lim's reaction.

"Ah, um...."

Teita called out in a rather conservative voice, restoring Ellen's presence of mind. She gazed at the maid's hazel eyes. There was a wariness within them. Thinking about it, she had given an expression that was not quite expected. Cheerfully, Ellen tapped Teita's shoulder.

"I'll have to give you my thanks. I'm liking the boy more and more."

Teita's face was shocked. Ellen laughed once again.

"I'm feeling good. When I return to Zhcted, I can leave him in your care."

When Limlisha awoke, Ellen was heading out. Though she tried to accompany her, naturally, she was refused.

Reluctantly, she wrapped herself in a blanket and waited until the scheduled wake-up call.

“What if an assassin aimed for your life?”

Though she wanted to say that so that she could accompany her, Lim had fallen when a group of assassins attacked her the other day.

Despite the chill of the early morning, she quickly washed her face with water and cleaned her golden hair as she passed her left hand through it. She changed clothes and wore a thick, blue, overcoat as a measure against the cold.

She told herself it would be fine. Ellen was not guarded by only herself. There were many soldiers watching over the area, and she had the Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool granted to the Vanadis. Even if a poisoned arrow flew from great distances, Ellen could defend against it.

She clutched her favorite stuffed bear, which could fit in her hands, to calm her mind. Lim left the barracks with her sword at her waist. When she asked for Ellen's whereabouts from the soldiers beside the tent, she was told they still had not returned.

--- What should I do?

She asked herself. She seldom hesitated.

At present, there were others who could assist Ellen. It was not like everyone was asleep at this time, except for perhaps a young man who slept until noon. He had still not gotten rid of that habit, so Lim had to scold him on more than one occasion.

--- I suppose Eleanora-sama will be fine.

Beneath the wind were two banners fluttering. She called for the soldiers on guard.

“Is Lord Tigrevurmud awake yet?”

As expected, the answer was negative. She was told someone was sent.

In the large tent, the young, red-haired man was wrapped in a blanket, breathing deeply and quietly. His black bow was propped beside it. Though there should have been an elder man serving beside him and a young maid, neither could be seen. Perhaps they already left.

“He really is a deep sleeper....”

Her voice was positive as she spoke in amazement. Lim compromised and got to her knees before Tigre, lightly shaking his shoulder.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, it is already morning. Please wake up.”

There was no reaction. Either he was deep asleep or he was catching up on lost rest.

“The soldiers have already begun preparations for breakfast. As the General of an army, how can you oversleep?”

She scolded Tigre with cliched words. She shook him more strongly, but received no reaction.

--- The last time, I thrust a sword into his mouth.

Tigre, at the time, was a captive, and Lim was strongly hostile. She could not do it now.

For the two...Their relationship changed a great deal in a short amount of time.

Comparing the past and present, she indulged in a strange, deep emotion.

Tigre, General of the forces, was taught by her. Lim noticed her position and was slightly surprised.

“Really, you are a mystery.”



With a smile, she brought her hand from Tigre's shoulder to his red hair and gently stroked it. Tigre did not wake up, but distorted his face as if he had an itch. He brought his hand to his head.

Or so it should have gone.

Their hands overlapped.

Lim deeply and involuntarily inhaled and gazed at their hands. Warmth came through her hand; her face dyed red. Many seconds passed like that.

“Wake up, Tigre. I came to get you personally.”

At the entrance, Teita and Ellen rudely walked in. Lim shrank out of surprise and looked back at her Lord with argent hair.

“If it isn't Lim. Why are you here?”

Though it would end if she said she came to wake Tigre, she was shy from what had just happened and could not speak. Lim looked up in confusion as Ellen walked toward her with narrowed eyes.

“You, even if he's difficult to wake up, to try and pull his hair....”

“I was not---”

She tried to suppress her intense emotions and spoke with a large voice, pulling a few hairs out of his head as she shook her hands.

“Tigre-sama, are you okay?”

Confused by the situation, Teita ran up to Tigre in a hurry. After confirming his well being, Teita looked at Lim accusingly.

Unable to remain still, Lim bowed deeply and apologized for her impoliteness.

“It's fine, though try to limit it so I don't go bald.”

Tigre's response was mixed with a yawn; Lim was saved at last.

In the tent, there sat one young man and three girls surrounding a map.

Ellen, Lim, Teita and Tigre, making four people. After Tigre had breakfast, they held a meeting, though Teita was only present to remove the meals.

“Four days have passed since we reached these plains, have we found anything?”

The meeting began as usual. First, they would hear Lim's opinion, whose turmoil from the morning disturbance was now gone. She looked at Tigre and spoke in a straight expression and voice which did not display her emotions. She was young, only 19 years old, yet she was well versed in political affairs and the military arts.

“There were many troublesome issues, but nothing serious.”

Tigre responded in a calm manner. He was 16 years old and had rather short, dull hair and dark eyes. His features were sober, and his mild smile suited him well.

He wore ordinary hempen clothes with leather shoes and looked no different from any villager in the area.

This was how he always dressed, though he was a General commanding six thousand troops.

“The number of fights has increased and our food and fuel are getting tight. That is the current situation.”

“Don't forget, your debt is increasing.”

Ellen added those words with a straight face while sipping some soup.

“What we eat isn't free, after all.”

The stewed soup was made with two kinds of salted fish and mussels and three herbs. Though the salted fish was strong enough to make it difficult to eat, the taste became moderate once boiled.

The breakfast also included a hard bread and cheese as well as a bit of wine. The soup was the only thing different from the soldiers' rations.

The food was bought from the towns and cities in the vicinity. Also, not a single person from the Zhcted Army

showed his face. The Brune soldiers were the ones in charge and took control of the Zhcted gold.

“We have entered Territoire which is under Viscount Augre's command. If we asked, we could requisition food and fuel, but I would rather not cause any trouble for the locals if possible.”

That was the general consensus.

Very few Brune nobles were willing to aid Tigre. Tigre's soldiers, the soldiers of those intimate with him, and the soldiers Viscount Augre was able to procure numbered one thousand.

They were now all gathered together.

“By the way, Lim.”

After finishing her soup, Ellen looked to her expressionless subordinate.

“Do we have a formal name for the army?”

Lim frowned lightly. Though it was difficult to see such a minor change, Ellen and Tigre noticed.

“I don't think that is a particularly important issue, but
....”

“No, I just thought they could be called the
^{Unstoppable Silver Flow}
[Silver Meteor Army].”

Ellen smiled happily as she continued egging the two on. Lim and Tigre noticed her intent to tease them.

--- *The Silver Meteor Army, is it....*

It seemed to be a fairly exaggerated name for the army Tigre led. Lim was reluctant to agree.

Before the soldiers under Augre's care joined, she was questioned on what to call the army.

“The core of the army are Lord Tigrevurmud and Eleanora-sama. I think it fine to call it [The Alsace LeitMeritz Allied Forces].”

Lim proposed that. Tigre also considered it in his own way.

“We can't forget the aristocrats who helped us, so it might be best to call it [The LeitMeritz and Feudal Lords of Brune United Army].”

“With that kind of name, there won't be any morale. What do you think the soldiers would say to these names?”

Ellen rejected the idea while sighing deeply with an exhausted expression.

“Then, do you have any ideas, Ellen?”

And so, Tigre asked Ellen. Ellen nodded with a confident smile and spoke her thoughts.

Although there was a dissenting opinion, since there were no alternative names, it was decided the name of the army would be the [Silver Meteor Army]. Tigre aside, Lim did not seem satisfied to the very end.

“Si, Silver, Meteor....”

Though Lim's expression did not change, her voice was small as she squeezed those words out. Tigre decided it was a bit pitiful and offered his help.

“Regarding our conversation of food and fuel a moment ago, how much do we have left?”

Lim showed relief on her face and nodded to Tigre. Though Ellen noticed what Tigre was doing and sharpened her eyes, she listened without saying anything more.

“As we are equipped now, we will last for twenty days, though we have a little leeway on our money. Because of that, we should be able to manage through the winter, so long as the neighboring towns continue selling goods. However, we will have problems should anything unexpected happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example, if some aristocrat commanding two or three thousand men allied with us, we would not have the food ready.”

Imagining what might happen, Tigre's expression darkened. Though he welcomed more allies, the consumption of food would also increase.

“Also, we will be in even more trouble if Duke Thenardier interferes with the distribution of food and fuel.”

“Though it is possible Duke Thenardier could do so, it is unlikely.”

“While the townspeople are generous, we should still consider measures.”

When Lim finished, a young Knight entered.

The man was tall and had a well appearing face, but there was no hair atop it. He seemed proud, looked on with a fearless attitude, and spoke with an imposing tone .

“Lord Tigrevurmud, it looks like we've got a bit more trouble.”

He spoke to Tigre in a somewhat happy tone.

“Really, Rurick, what is it this time?”

In contrast to this Knight – Rurick – Tigre stood up with a wearied look. Hanging the quiver to his waist, he grabbed his black bow.

“I will return and finish my meal. Please leave things as they are for me.”

"But your soup will get cold."

"It's good even when cool, since you made it."

He responded with a smile. Teita looked up with an embarrassed face. Tigre glanced at Ellen and Lim.

"I'll be back in a moment."

"Got it. Hurry up and take care of this."

Ellen waved her hand comfortably. Lim, next to her, silently rose.

"Lim."

Just by calling to her, Lim was held back.

When Tigre and Rurick left, Ellen watched as Lim set the soup aside.

"These days, aren't you hanging around Tigre a bit much?"

"I suppose that is the case."

“Before, you would have said he failed in dealing with trouble and would withdraw his meal.”

“We are on a battlefield. With battle possible at any moment, I cannot afford to say such things.”

Lim responded curtly before sipping her wine.

“...Like I thought. Did something happen? Well, he is the first person to have felt your chest, and he even sucked out poison from them.”

Lim choked. Though she did not spit out her wine, she coughed several times as Ellen glared at her lightly.

“I could say the very same of you. You were quite defenseless, Eleanora-sama, when Lord Tigrevurmud saw you bathing, as well as when he pushed you down--”

Lim suddenly stopped speaking, having felt the weight of someone's eyes on her. Teita held the tableware, her face pale, as she looked at Lim, urging her to continue.

Lim looked back shyly before gazing at the floor. She stood up, finished her wine in a single gulp, and placed it on the table.

“...I will have a look at the troubles here.”

“Shouldn't you say you'll be helping Tigre?”

While sipping her soup, Ellen responded in a clear, unyielding tone.

“This will be a good experience for him. With his experience, six thousand troops is just about right. If he fails, you and I can manage it somehow.”

“You are willing to let him fail?”

Hearing Lim's question, Ellen looked up with a dangerous smile on her face.

“Everyone will face the frustration of failure at some point. Even you and I have, I believe.”

A faint, bitter smile floated to her unsociable face as Lim bowed.

Ellen finished her soup and gave the bowl to Teita. After that, she noticed the woman with chestnut-brown hair hesitating.

“I will say this for him, but I told you it was a bit different while we were drawing water this morning...I think.”

“I, I see. I suppose you're right.”

Though she nodded, she was still dubious.

“If you have difficulty ignoring these things, it's fine to ask Tigre.”

--- I will leave this to Tigre. It should be just the right amount of experience.

Having him away nonchalantly, Ellen sipped her wine calmly.

“This is the cause of the fight?”

Clutching his black bow, Tigre left the tent with Rurick. He carefully asked so as to hide the bitterness in his expression.

A line of soldiers lined up outside the tent. As the General of the army, even if he was in a bad mood, he could not express his emotions so openly.

The smoke of cooked foods silently rose and disappeared in the morning sky.

“That cloud.”

While walking next to Tigre, Rurick pointed to the sky. Tigre looked up at the cloud.

“This is a first for me.... One of the Brune soldiers noticed the cloud. You can see it resembles a horse.”

“I see. So what about it?”

He spoke as if it were obvious. After all, Tigre was born in Brune as well.

“It is like Bayard, the horse found on the battle flag of Brune Kingdom.”

The founder of Brune Kingdom, Founder Charles, rode Bayard, a magic horse with a red body and black mane. It

is thought he mounted his steed and rode about the domestic grounds, anywhere in an instant. It was said at his postmortem that his soul had run to heaven.

“In our country, it is a sign that Zirnitra has passed by.”

Tigre looked satisfied.

Zirnitra was the Black Dragon of Zhcted Kingdom. The King who founded the country was an incarnation of Zirnitra according to his proclamations.

“So, for some reason, this little argument erupted, and now people are fighting?”

“Right now, nothing has happened, but the atmosphere is tense.”

Tigre listened to Rurick's words, who was clearly amused. The bald Knight seemed interested in how Tigre would handle the situation.

Though, normally, the General should not deal with such issues, the reason Tigre came to personally address

the situation was to acclimate himself to his position in the army. He would rather not leave everything to Rurick.

This was especially true if it dealt with a quarrel between soldiers.

He arrived at the scene and saw the trouble. The Zhcted soldiers outnumbered those of Brune by nearly ten to one. They were glaring at each other with their teeth bared. As Rurick said, though they were not fighting, the atmosphere was volatile.

Tigre stopped his feet, took an arrow from his quiver, and nocked his bow.

“Are you aiming at their feet?”

Rurick asked a dangerous question. Actually, if he shot an arrow at their feet, it would hardly be a threat. It would be more intimidating to shoot it at the level of their line of sight. Regardless, the legends of each country were inconsequential.

“A wounded person can't fight. I have no reason to injure anyone.”

“Certainly that is true....”

After speaking, Rurick looked at the arrow in Tigre's hand, showing interest.

“What is that?”

“It's an arrow I received from Viscount Augre. Apparently it whistles.”

The arrow had a slightly different shape from usual. Below the arrowhead was an oval nut with small holes cut into it.

Tigre casually drew his bow string to its limits and shot the arrow to the sky. The mysterious sound blared in the wind, similar to the song of a bird.

The arrow flew in a small arc and stopped right before the soldiers, who were stunned by the strange sound.

“--- What is this commotion?”

After confirming they were no longer heated up, Tigre called out in an overbearing tone. To suppress their

hot-blooded nature, it was necessary to act a little aggressively. He was well accustomed to such things as ruler of Alsace.

Though the soldiers wore awkward faces, they appealed to him and expressed their opinions. It was as he heard from Rurick.

“In other words, the disagreement comes from whether that cloud is an omen of Bayard or Zirnitra? Is that really the source of your dispute?”

The soldiers nodded seriously. They all looked for Tigre's reaction. All the young soldiers were curious how their General would act.

“It's both.”

“Ha.”

Hearing Tigre's words, the soldiers responded with vacant faces. They twisted their heads, since his answer did not follow Brune Scripture.

“... Is that fine?”

“Whether it's Bayard or Zirnitra, not everyone here has heard both stories. It's appropriate enough that you think it can be both.”

His words cut through their momentum. Tigre was fairly well versed with the mythology of Brune, but he was not particularly knowledgeable of the myth of Zirnitra. Lim, his teacher, postponed the details of the old stories.

“Whether it is Bayard or Zirnitra, you can think of it in your own way, but if you wish to disagree, I will be more than happy to be your opponent.”

The soldiers glanced at the ground where the arrow was thrust.

“No, we have no objection.”

The Zhcted soldiers withdrew first. They knew of Tigre's skill with the bow, and they noticed Rurick's presence.

“I hope none of you have anything more to say.”

Beneath Tigre's gaze, the soldiers of Brune withdrew. Though they despised the arrow, they could do nothing before Tigre's attitude.

“Very well. As punishment for this commotion, today and tomorrow, all of you will have a reduced supply of fuel.”

It was a light punishment. Neither opposition nor complaints were raised.

The soldiers scattered. As Tigre retrieved the arrow, calm returned to the surroundings. Rurick walked next to him and whispered praise.

“That was well done.”

Tigre responded with a sigh and bitter smile.

“It was likely due to the gaze coming from behind me, right? Thank you.”

“I was simply offering words of gratitude. There was no need to say anything for that level of action.”

“Even if it is trivial, it is proper to acknowledge your action.”

“Even if it is justifiable, its importance will decrease. It is no different from saying you love a woman. There are times when you should and should not use it.”

Tigre smiled sarcastically after hearing Rurick's words.

“That's an easy to understand comparison.”

The army within Brune, the [Silver Meteor Army], had an odd configuration of forces. A foreign army composed more than 80% of the troops, and the General was an obscure 16 year old.

Though it was obvious quarrels would happen, Tigre's opinion was naive.

While building their camp, more than two dozen commotions had occurred that Tigre was not aware of, probably even more.

Neither Brune nor Zhcted had large differences in language, and most of the Gods they worshiped were the

same. Though there was hope the two would be able to work together, minor differences sparked larger conflicts.

There was not too much a problem between Alsace and Territoire, but the remaining soldiers were from the Zhcted Army.

However, no one was interested in causing a fight, since they were the core of the army.

Though Viscount Augre could mediate between the two forces, there were places his eyes never reached.

“It is a bit poor to say, but it might be best if the battle arrived earlier.”

Rurick spoke with a wry smile. Tigre seemed to ignore his words as he shrugged.

He wished to move to Nemetacum, three days west, but Tigre did not move. To be more accurate, he could not move.

There were several reasons. Massas had traveled to the Royal Capital, Nice, and there was no contact. That was the largest concern.

If he were to fight against Duke Thenardier, it would be necessary to sever any connection with the King. Ideally, he should get permission, but it was unlikely to happen, especially since he invited the Zhcted Army into the country. He still needed to make his justification clear

.

Tigre could assert his justice by speaking up, but, unfortunately, he had no influence.

As an aristocrat of Brune, it was necessary for him to obtain approval from the King.

When the tent came into sight, Tigre was stopped by a voice from behind.

--- *What trouble is there now?*

Ruffling his red hair somewhat aggressively, Tigre turned back to see a young soldier with a tense face.

“I come here under the name of Marquis Greast. His excellency wishes to speak with you, Earl.”

“Greast...?”

Tigre inclined his head. He had never heard the name, but it was necessary to correspond courteously if he were a Marquis.

“Did you come alone, today? Or did you come as Marquis Greast's attendant?”

Tigre thought he would have come alone, though it was arbitrary.

“... For the time being, he wishes to meet with you immediately. A table and chair has been prepared two hundred alsin away.”

Not knowing whether he was an ally or not, it was obvious why he was being cautious.

After listening to instructions from the soldier, he walked at a brisk pace. Tigre entered a tent accompanied by Rurick, the soldier allowing entry at once.

A bright light shined inside the tent. An elder gentleman wearing loose-fitting clothes quietly sipped porridge. He looked at Tigre and smiled like a good-natured grandfather.

"I apologize for my poor manners, but it cools quickly. I hope you can pardon my actions."

"No, I apologize for interrupting your meal."

Tigre responded with a smile. Rurick stood a half step behind and nodded silently while kneeling before Augre. Tigre immediately explained the situation with Marquis Greast. The smile disappeared from his face.

"That old bastard, Greast?"

"Do you know of him?"

"I have met him a few times before. I would have to say he is Duke Ganelon's right-hand man...."

The wrinkles on his face increased as he explored his memory. He then remembered he had a dish of porridge and a spoon in his hand.

"Right, we received a letter from Massas. Ganelon's army has advanced toward Alsace. He wrote of Marquis Greast as well."

Tigre's complexion changed. If Massas had not stopped their movements, Ganelon's army would have

reached Alsace before Thenardier's. The news would not be good.

“What will you do?”

“For now, I will listen to his story. It would be bothersome to let things be.”

“In that case, allow me to accompany you. I will see if this Marquis Greast is the real thing.”

He wore his wooden geta and followed after Tigre.

The air was unnaturally dry and the room was dimly lit.

In the dark, a small elderly person wrapped in a black robe flipped through a book. A normal person would be absorbed in deciphering the characters which were difficult to read.

He was in a room in Duke Thenardier's mansion.

The elder's name was Drekaovac. He served as a soothsayer for the Duke for the past few years. Many considered him an odd doctor. Only Duke Thenardier, who employed him, knew of his true ability.

Drekaovac silently flipped through the pages. Suddenly, his slender fingers stopped, pinching a wrinkled page. He noticed someone approaching the room.

The door opened without any greeting. Before it stood a young man.

“Hey, it's been a while.”

He raised his hand and spoke with a jovial voice. Even in the dark room, it was easy to tell he was a man of medium build. He wore thick clothes, decorated with fur along the collar and sleeves, and a green turban wrapped about his head and his short, black hair which hung to his shoulders.

He took steps in a calm manner. He gave the impression of being an elusive individual.

“So you came, Vodyanoy.”

With his back turned, Dreka^{vac} stated his business promptly.

“Do you know of Molsheim Plains in Alsace? It is to the northeast.”

“Ah, that's where the boy lost miserably.”

Vodyanoy responded, his smile not receding even a little.

“I want you to go there.”

While Dreka^{vac} continued to flip through his book, he continued speaking.

“I want you to retrieve the ^{Vyfal}Wyvern corpse that dropped in the marshes there.”

“The Dragon's corpse? What of the boy's corpse which fell alongside it?”

“It does not matter.”

The old man in a black robe spoke as if he were talking about a roadside pebble.

“You only need to bring me the Wyvern remains.”

“Oh? Why are you suddenly interested in this?”

While playing with his green turban, Vodyanoy voiced his question.

“I am bothered about something.”

Drekavac, continuing his thoughts, spoke in a gloomy tone.

“There were two bright light there. I understand one came from the Vanadis, but I have not heard of the source of the other.”

Vodyanoy waited for the rest of the story, but Drekavac spoke no more. Understanding he should not pursue any further, the youth shrugged his shoulders.

“The Vanadis... It seems the Silver Flash is in the country. What will you do?”

A dangerous light shined in the boy's eyes. Drekavac perceived the change in the man standing behind him.

“I will let others take care of that. Regrettably, we cannot win that battle.”

“Oh? Who in this country could oppose the Vanadis?”

“The Black Knight Roland, the man who possesses the [Sword of ^{Durandal} Invincibility].”

Hearing Drekvac's answer, Vodyanoy had an unexpected reaction.

“I wonder if that burden will be too heavy.”

“It cannot be helped. There are no weapons to oppose a ^{Viralt} Dragonic Tool other than the [Sword of Invincibility]. The legend of our country states it was a weapon created by God, bestowed to the founder, who remained ignorant of its utility.”

Looking back at the old man laughing with a muffled voice, Vodyanoy, shrugged his shoulders in his mind.

“So... you want me to dive into that swamp? It's not exactly a pleasant job.”

The answer was as anticipated. Drekvac removed his hand from the book and pointed to the corner of the room. There, bags of gold received from Duke Thenardier lay on the ground, as if casually thrown aside

.

“Take it.”

Vodyanoy smiled from ear to ear. Walking to the corner nimbly, he used both hands to take gold coins out of the bags.

He held them as if in love and dropped them into his mouth. The sound of coins rustling could be heard as they traveled down his throat.

When all coins were swallowed, Vodyanoy bowed to Drekvac in an exaggerated manner.

“Thanks for the business.”

Ganelon's Plan

Tigre left the camp with Ellen and Viscount Augre.

Though he hesitated to bring Ellen along with him, Tigre knew it was necessary to demonstrate his military ties with the Zhcted Army to remove any doubt that he may be militarily inferior.

“Relax. Remain silent and say only what is necessary.”

Just in case, Lim ordered the soldiers to remain on standby. With Marquis Greast's purposes unknown, no preparation was excessive.

A young man with a horse greeted them at the meeting place. He removed its saddle and bridle, giving it a chance to rest.

“No doubt about it. That's Marquis Greast.”

Augre whispered those words to Tigre. There were no signs of people lurking in the surrounding meadows or the shadows.

Tigre advanced and greeted the man courteously.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Marquis Greast. I am the current head of House Vorn, Tigrevurmud.”

“It is nice to meet you, Earl. I am Charon Anquetil Greast.”

Marquis Greast was a man in his late twenties. Though he had a childish face, his hair was carefully trimmed and had a hint of gray. He wore complex gold embroidered silk clothing which suited his body.

A kind smile floated to his mouth, letting off an atmosphere as if he truly did bear the desire of friendship.

Greast glanced at the two people to the left and right of Tigre. Toward Augre, he flashed an ill-natured smile.

“Is that not Viscount Augre? I thought you retired; it seems you are still well.”

“Unfortunately. The world is not so peaceful that I can relax in hiding.”

“It must be troublesome to be so healthy at such an old age. Perhaps it would be clever not to have that happen.”

Greast laughed at Augre with sarcasm before facing Ellen.

“Vanadis of Zhcted, Eleanora Viltaria.”

Ellen bowed after concisely stating her name. Greast raised a voice of admiration.

“The Vanadis said to be a match for a thousand who made the troops flee from Dinant. To think a warrior of that caliber would be such a lovely woman. Both your blue dress and your sword suit you.”

As though the Vanadis was his opponent, Greast stepped forward toward Ellen instead of receiving Tigre.

However, Ellen felt something unpleasant from the Marquis' gaze. His eyes were feverishly crawling all across her body.

Greast presented his right hand. As a matter of courtesy, Ellen took the hand of the gray haired Marquis.

“No, I was quite surprised. The rumors truly are unreliable.”

“Rumors?”

“In the King's Capital, Nice, stories of your deeds are floating about. The Vanadis of legend who wields a blade which can slay even a dragon. Certainly such rumors would be overwhelmed by your beauty.”

That certainly would be true; however, Ellen simply returned an ambiguous smile and silence. She wished only to remove her hands from his, but Greast showed no pretense in letting go.

On the contrary, while they were shaking hands, his left hand had wrapped about hers, rubbing her fingers as if to enjoy the smoothness of her skin.

It was a subtle gesture, rather than a candid one, and would likely fall within the bounds of courtesy. Ellen strongly suppressed the feeling of goosebumps welling throughout her body.

“By the way, how did such a situation come to be... How is it you are cooperating with Earl Vorn?”

“I was employed. In order to realize his justice, I moved across the border with my troops.”

Using money to buy justice was simply an excuse. Ellen had no desire to reveal her intentions to this man.

“So Lord Eleanora finds justice in Earl Vorn's convictions.”

“Of course. After all, he is a far more honest man than Duke Thenardier.”

Hearing Ellen's response, Greast looked at Tigre who stood next to her and nodded his head in assent.

“Certainly. Your relationship hardly seems like that of a man and woman. Certainly, you would need a man of rank such as myself, at the very least.”

“... Such kind words, Marquis Greast.”

While holding down the temptation to crush Greast's hand, Ellen smiled violently.

“It is true Earl Vorn and I are not in such a relationship, but I have yet to find anything worth scrutiny. Still, I shall keep your words in mind.”

“... If you two would kindly continue on to business.”

Augre spoke in a calm voice to interrupt the intense atmosphere. Tigre thanked the old Viscount in his mind.



If he were not in such a situation, Tigre, too, would have shouted at the man. This man, after all, had grasped Ellen's hand and had not let go.

Greast ignored Augre and Tigre and apologized only to Ellen.

"I apologize, Lord Eleanora. There are such rumors in the capital as well, a story of a man and woman of pubescent age from warring countries. Isn't it just like a story out of imagination?"

"... Marquis Greast, you took a horse all this way. Let us end this small talk and get down to business."

Ellen forcibly ended the conversation and pulled her hand away in such a way that it would not be viewed as violent.

--- What's with this guy's eyes? He's not just another pervert...

It was difficult to express. Greast gave off a strange feeling, as if he were still hiding his true character. Tigre offered Greast a seat, demonstrating the utmost limits of human prudence and self control.

“Please, have a seat, Marquis.”

Tigre waited for Greast to take a seat before he and his companions took theirs. Tigre took a few minutes to prepare wine, pouring it into a silver chalice. He drank a small amount first to prove there were no signs of poison. After confirming this, Greast also took up the silver cup.

“Now then, the main subject... I will get straight to the point. Earl Vorn, Duke Ganelon has expressed his support.”

--- *So it really is like that...*

Tigre felt as if his heart had been squeezed.

“I have heard it was you who slayed Lord Zaien, son of Duke Thenardier. You should use every possible option you can to restore your public relation with Duke Thenardier; if that is so, our interests correspond. Duke Ganelon will welcome you with pleasure.”

Greast's voice was like cold water which entered through small gaps. His words, though very typical, were filled with an eeriness which chilled the hearts of those who heard them.

“Assuming I associate with Duke Ganelon...”

Tigre's throat was parched. Though he wished to drink , he could not possibly remove his eyes from Greast as he continued his words.

“In return, what will I receive? It is necessary for me to repay the Zhcted Army which has cooperated with my will.”

“You can relax.”

Greast showed neither surprise nor hesitation. He smiled even more radiantly before giving a prompt response.

“Duke Ganelon will more than sufficiently reward you , Earl Vorn. He is generous to his followers. “

“A reward, is it.”

He had completely miscalculated Greast's intentions. Tigre had thought he would act crudely and act unsparingly.

“Do you know of the city of Rance?”

“It is the capital.”

It was the capital city of the territory ruled by Duke Thenardier. Greast simply nodded to his response.

“We will fight with Duke Thenardier sooner or later. Once we capture Rance, we will allow you, and the Zhcted Army who fight with you, one day to plunder the city. That is what Ganelon has said.”

“Plunder... is it?”

Tigre's voice was hoarse, and sweat ran down his back in surprise and shock. It was not just Tigre, Ellen and Augre watched Greast in blank surprise. He calmly smiled as he received the gaze from the three.

“There is no need to be surprised. From ages past, the fall of a city has always been accompanied by destruction and pillaging. The people are played with and sold off as slaves. All who resist are cut down, those who took shelter in the temple are surrounded and threatened. All is deprived, all is destroyed, all is violated. Houses are demolished, and you return triumphant with money in hand.”

“... I see, then we must appear odd.”

“Are you any different? I see, you must be wary of arson. Don't worry, you may leave your soldiers to take whatever they please. Rance is a large city after all. Even if you should lead ten thousand troops, you would not be able to go through even half the city.”

Tigre was at a loss for words. He could not speak immediately.

Of course, he knew such things happened when a city fell in battle, nor were Greast's words a lie or an exaggeration.

However, the image which floated to Tigre's mind after hearing the story was the spectacle of Alsace under attack by Zaien.

Innocent people were brutally killed, and houses were lit on fire. The temple which housed people was surrounded by soldiers, and Teita nearly lost her life.

If he had reached the city any later, Tigre would have lost many more things.

“What will you do, Earl Vorn?”

“--- I wish to hear something.”

Ellen, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke. Though her tone was normal, no emotion appeared in her bright red eyes.

“What if Rance decides to surrender? It will be possible to take the city without bloodshed.”

“No, let us not bother of speaking of such a thing.”

Greast turned a friendly gaze to Ellen as he answered.

“Duke Thenardier would never think of relinquishing Rance, no matter how many people or soldiers he might lose. Furthermore, we will never allow him to.”

Tigre thought that would be the case. He had heard Duke Thenardier was not a man who would hesitate to hurt the people. His son, Zaien was no different.

“Furthermore, it is not just Rance, there are other cities Lord Ganelon has decided to raze. There would be no way to maintain troop morale otherwise.”

An unpleasant story.

Greast returned his gaze to Tigre and continued to speak even more harshly.

“As for your obligations, your army will serve under Duke Ganelon. Should he wish it, you are to deliver food and fuel from the towns and villages in your domain. If you resist him, he will eliminate you by force.”

Tigre desperately suppressed his urge to shout that they were no different from thieves. He strongly clenched his fist beneath the table.

“There is one more thing I must say regarding the attack on Rance I spoke of a moment ago. You will fight at the vanguard. Furthermore, you will be obligated to fight following the honor of warfare. Do you understand your duties?”

This was no joke by any stretch of the imagination.

Tigre wished to refuse at once. It was clear he was Duke Ganelon's enemy.

“... I understand. I will speak to my subordinates and respond tomorrow.”

“No. I wish for an answer immediately.”

Greast shook his head and looked seriously after hearing Tigre's words.

“Earl Vorn, you must not misunderstand. This is not a request for your cooperation but your submission. Will you follow Lord Ganelon? Or will you not... I want your answer. His Excellency will not permit neutrality.”

Tigre felt Augre and Ellen gaze at him from the left and right. Alsace, the soldiers, and their answer would be the same.

“I will not submit.”

As they watched Greast gradually disappear in the distance, Ellen spoke to Tigre.

“Is it fine leaving it like that?”

“Did you think it necessary to kill him?”

Ellen agreed to Tigre's words, more in confirmation than as a question. Ellen nodded and looked at her hand with eyes full of disgust.

“That man likely would have tried to invite me as well .”

He truly was likely to have asked to employ the Zhcted Army.

Greast had ignored Tigre's presence and spoke in a dignified manner, even before the three people. Whether he was foolish or sturdy, his nerves were hardly normal.

“I should have just killed him. It would have been perfect to simply bury his head. Then we would crush his men. He did not come here alone.”

Tigre smiled wryly as he shook his head.

“I heard from Lord Massas that Marquis Greast is a careful person. He came with his guards with some plan in mind.”

“That might be so.”

Augre agreed with Tigre's words.

“If I may speak, Lord Vanadis. With his insistence in coming this far, it is possible he came to discern the movement of the army on Ganelon's behalf.”

Though Ellen seemed dissatisfied, she did not object.

When Tigre returned to camp, it was wrapped in a strange atmosphere. Dishes were cleaned in a hurry and many soldiers were inspecting their armor.

It was likely there were circumstances, but before Tigre could grasp any information, Lim came running to him. She held a small helmet in her arm and showed a clear readiness to fight at once. Teita stood behind her.

“Eleanora-sama. We have received report from a scout a short time ago. To the north, approximately one day's march, there are six thousand troops stationed.”

“The flag?”

Augre asked in a sharp voice.

“Green with a Golden Unicorn.”

Hearing Lim's answer, he knit his eyebrows, hearing unwelcome words.

“We must make haste if it is the Golden Unicorn.”

Lim followed up immediately. The Unicorn was not from Zhcted but from Brune. Augre, who understood, turned pale.

“I see, so it is Duke Ganelon's banner. So that's how it is...”

Tigre also understood the situation. Greast would command his troops shortly after.

“And yet he came to talk alone. He's far more bold than his appearance suggests.”

Ellen muttered in admiration.

“Sorry. If I had known it would come down to this, I would have killed him...”

Though Tigre obediently apologized, Ellen simply shook her head.

“There has not been much time since our talks have ended. Someone must have been watching from a long distance, though it's not impossible they were waiting for this regardless.”

“The soldiers have been ordered to vacate the camp for the time being. What will you do?”

Lim directed her blue eyes to Tigre.

“First, let's return to the tent.”

Tigre showed no sign of haste, even in the intense atmosphere. He responded in a completely composed manner. Teita looked over Lim's shoulders in anxiety.

“Batan and anyone else you might need, take them and stay in back.”

Teita looked up again, her hazel eyes bright and determined once again.

“Tigre-sama. I will be fine. Please return home safe---”

Her face was red and her voice was strained. She was straining herself too much and was caught on her words.

Tigre smiled bitterly and touched her head to comfort her.

“You're a brave girl.”

Ellen had a face as though she was hiding her laughter. She also placed her hand on Teita's head and began stroking it roughly.

“Don't worry. I'll be with Tigre. At most, we have to worry about six thousand troops.”

For anyone else, it would seem a boast, but the Vanadis' words had a persuasive power, even her atmosphere did as well.

Teita looked up at Ellen, like a lost child, before speaking.

“I, I pray... the fortunes of war be with you.”

Ellen showed a moment of surprise before returning a gentle smile. She pat Teita's head again, though gently this time.

Teita left with Batran. Four people now remained.

“To the north of the river are the Orange Plains while a small forest is to the south. There are few hills or mountains in the surroundings.”

While pointing toward a map with her finger, Lim continued her explanation.

The river flowed almost straight from east to west. Given what the scout had reported, it would take approximately one day to cross the river.

“The scout reported six thousand troops. There are approximately five thousand infantry and one thousand cavalry.”

“Discovering this was a good thing; it would be terrible if the scout found it any later.”

Ellen nodded to Tigre's words. They had earned a significant amount of time for preparation; furthermore, they could expect to have time to receive more information.

“We are in the center of these plains. To be more accurate, we have a slight advantage in elevation, and we number six thousand. We need approximately four hundred men to handle food and six hundred to deal

with equipment, so we will fight with five thousand. They do not have a significant numerical advantage.”

Ellen seemed happy as she looked at the land.

“If we head north, it's likely we will meet their companions across the river. Since Greast came alone, he may have wanted to scout out our number. Tigre, it was good that you didn't invite him inside the camp.”

“Viscount Augre, are there any towns or villages in the area?”

Tigre was worried. Greast would not hesitate to attack the towns or villages.

“There are no towns, but there are a few villages in the area.”

Augre borrowed a brush from Lim and placed dots where the villages were located on the map.

“You don't need to be so anxious. We don't need to go to them immediately. Set up camp. Those from Territoire that see our flag will eventually take shelter here.”

Tigre was relieved upon hearing those words. It was enough to conduct himself.

--- Still, we need to go north across the river.

It was necessary to keep the enemy's eyes on them instead of the villages.

When Tigre said that, Lim nodded expressionlessly. Augre continued to look at the map.

“Viscount Augre. How wide is this river?”

“The river is approximately thirty alsin. The water recedes in winter. Water will be at waist level for a normal adult.”

“Even if the river is shallow, it is not so simple to cross it.”

Ellen spoke up after Augre gave an answer. The water would dull movements and place them at a lower elevation, and the cold would gradually lower their temperature.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. How do you expect the enemy to move?”

Lim looked up from the map and asked Tigre.

--- This could be a good opportunity.

Tigre tried not to show his thoughts on his face. However, recently, she seemed to understand any slight changes in Tigre's attitude. A faint complimentary tone could be heard in her voice.

“We will have our cavalry cross to the opposite bank to secure the land and have our infantry follow afterward .”

“While the infantry cross the river, our cavalry will remain on defense. With their mobility, it should be possible, though the story is different if they have more troops.”

Lim spoke with a calm tone as if teaching a pupil. Ellen, with her arms folded before her, looked at Lim in dissatisfaction.

“You, your attitude is different from when you spoke to me.”

“Eleanora-sama, it is simply because you said you would take care of one thousand cavalry by yourself.”

“I don't remember saying anything I couldn't do.”

Ellen pushed her chest out proudly. Tigre and Lim exchanged a bitter smile.

“The enemy will think we have divided our troops. We will post our infantry here and have our cavalry head upstream and downstream at a distance they will not notice... Then we can force them into a pincer attack while we begin moving our infantry.”

“If we go by this plan... We could divide them here.”

Augre shook his head with a frown while Ellen nodded.

“Our entire army is here. I would rather not have any extra sacrifices.”

For Greast – that is, Duke Ganelon – annihilation here would not remove his ability to fight.

“In that case...”

Tigre pointed to the map and proposed an idea to hear Ellen, Lim, and Augre's respective views before making any corrections to it.

“Let's go with this.”

“Let's try it.”

The four confirmed the plan and nodded strongly.

Marquis Greast who led Duke Ganelon's army finally crossed the river the next day. He had proceeded much more slowly than expected.

He had taken one thousand cavalry and five thousand infantry, both with brilliant armor which reflected the fighting spirit in their faces.

Above all, Greast was motivated.

He rode in a carriage at the rear of a caravan. Of course , it did not mean he could not ride on horseback.

A soldier came to report to Greast, who lay buried in the cushions next to his elaborately decorated sword, that they had taken their side of the river.

“... And the water?”

Moving a cushion aside and straightening his body, Greast looked at the soldier like a hawk as he heard there were only a few puddles of water at the bottom of the riverbed.

--- *They'll cross a bit upstream, then.*

“They have been by the river for a while now. Check five belsta (approximately five kilometers) upstream and see if there are any signs of crossing.”

Greast ordered for the [General], who had an appearance like an older brother, to be present.

Soon, one man with a defeated face entered the wagon.

The General commanded five thousand troops. Though a distant relative of Duke Ganelon, it was incorrect to call him an Earl.

“You called, your Excellency?”

Though he spoke arrogantly, he was still lower in rank than Greast and Ganelon in public. Still, he firmly believed in his superiority as a distant relative of Ganelon.

Greast ignored the man's attitude and explained the soldier's report with a calm tone.

“What do you think of the enemy movements?”

He omitted the man's name because he was not called by name.

“I personally believe it is an invitation. While we cross the river, they will un-dam the river and divide us into two.”

Using an arrogant tone which ignored their rank, a smile floated to Greast's face while he awaited a response .

“So what would you do?”

“I would divide our troops in three and attack here. They will think they have crushed us when they emerge victorious.”

“Then you wish to make sure of the forests to the south.”

The General responded in a somewhat tepid manner. He was uninterested in forming a precise plan, it was a matter of his mood.

“I will leave this all to you.”

“... Excuse me, Your Excellency.”

The General ignored Greast's advice and began laying out his plans to the troops.

“We will fell the forest so none may approach, we will remove any chance of ambush or escape.”

Greast remained silent as he smiled wryly.

“We will take advantage of them and capture their Commander, the Vanadis of Zhcted.”

He ordered Ganelon's troops to be divided in three and had them begin their advance.

“We will crush the enemy, we will plunder their villages! Every person, every house, we shall search them all and take all they have!”

The General shouted to his soldiers.

Seeing their movements, Tigre showed no reaction; rather, he retreated even further.

Eventually, all five thousand infantry made their way across the river.

The sun had moved considerably, though the blue sky was scattered by white clouds. This much would change in only one koku.

“It is dangerous to stop here.”

When they reached the river, Ganelon's troops would have limited maneuverability. The plan could not be done halfway.

--- *We came here to fight.*

While he had selfishly ordered the army to advance against Tigre, a soldier approached the General.

"I have a message for you from Marquis Greast. [I leave command to you. I shall head down to the riverside . All victory and glory are yours]."

--- *Getting scared right before the battle?*

The General interpreted the message in that manner. Still, it could not be helped. He could not allow the enemy to retreat; they would fall here.

Marquis Greast had one hundred troops as a guard and left the General to attack Tigre's army. It seemed no one in the Ganelon Army knew the strength of the ^{Unstoppable Silver Flow} [Silver Meteor Army].

He had thrown away the General and his troops, using them as pawns to escape and prevent anyone from following after him.

The intense glow of the setting sun made the General act in haste. He wanted victory before the sun set, no matter what.

Greast was aware the man's temper had stolen the idea of retreat from his head.

The Ganelon Army had moved south across the Orange Plains a considerable distance. They had finally reached the forest and were preparing to attack Tigre.

Immediately afterward, dozens of arrows cut the wind and hit the Ganelon Army.

The rain of arrows was small and lacked intensity, but it surprised the Ganelon Army, causing them to mildly collapse.

The infantry of Brune traditionally wielded sword or spear with their right hand and shield in their left, so they were more open on that side.

“In the forest!? A foolish ambush...”

The General was shocked. In the winter, the forests had no leaves, it was completely open.

Although the sun had descended in the west, the sun was still out. He did not believe an ambush could take place here.

However, the arrows still rained on the army.

Inside the forest, approximately one-hundred-fifty archers from Zhcted and Brune stood in the shadows. Tigre had chosen excellent archers from amongst the soldiers, particularly Rurick. The men of the highest skill could, with certain accuracy, hit their target at a distance of one hundred alsin (about one hundred meters).

With bark, leaves, and soil on their clothes, hiding behind the trees in the deep shadows of the setting sun, they were completely hidden.

The troops in the Ganelon Army had become wary of an incoming attack and ignored the possibility of ambush from the forest in their impatience.

“I want five hundred men to go around to the other end of the forest! We won't retreat from something like this!”

Instead of retreating, he gave out an order; however, as he spoke, an arrow came flying from the forest and hit his helmet.

The arrow pierced the helmet and deeply injured his head, but it was not enough to take his life, but still, he shivered. The pit of his stomach was tight, and he could only think of the danger in staying in the area.

“... Take them from the rear.”

As the troops began to retreat, a rush of silver led an attack, even though Tigre's army had shown no signs of movement beforehand.

With a battle cry, the two armies clashed. The Silver Meteor Army rushed forward, leading the soldiers of Brune against their countrymen.

The cold air was blown away by heat, the clashing of swords was drowned out by screams. Blood splattered across the earth and was trampled underfoot.

No matter how thick the shield or how long the sword or spear, it was pointless once a person's stance was broken. Regardless of friend or foe, soldiers fell. Some were kicked over, many did not bother standing again, and others prayed to God that they might survive.

The battle for dominance was immediately stolen by the Silver Meteor Army. The Zhcted cavalry attacked the space to the right of the Ganelon Army.

The cavalry demonstrated their ability to rush forward. Their troops were divided in two, attacking Ganelon's army from the front and right flank. Standing no chance of resisting an attack from two fronts, the core of the Ganelon Army quickly collapsed.

Though the General issued commands one after another, he could not keep up with the sudden turn of events. The bulk of his army collapsed in the confusion, which spread rapidly to the right and left wing. Finally, the Ganelon Army began to retreat.

“Impossible. How could it turn out this way...”

With a cramp in his face, the General abandoned the fight; he had no other choice. With the incoming blade of

the Silver Meteor Army, he pulled out while scolding his troops.

The blue and white of the winter sky rapidly disappeared, falling to the darkness of nightfall.

Five hundred of Ganelon's troops entered the forest to take revenge on the archers, but they were struck down, one after another, without being able to close in on the enemy.

With a sword in their right hand and a shield in their left, just by stooping down a little bit, the Ganelon soldiers could protect themselves from any number of arrows.

However, the enemy had devised a number of tactics.

First, Brune soldiers in leather armor threw stones.

Stones the size of a fist were frightening weapons. If they hit the face or the hand, it would cause a severe injury, and, though it was possible to block them with a shield, they could not give chase.

They had also strung rope between the trees and dug pitfalls at the roots. Though the pits were only as deep as the shin, it still disrupted their balance.

Arrows were fired from high in the trees at long distances. While the troops were stuck, unable to move, the enemy changed positions and began attacking with stones and arrows from the side.

After one hundred men had been killed, the remainder discarded their weapons and ran from the forest.

“Well done.”

While watching the enemies flee, an archer spoke to Tigre.

“No. Everyone did amazingly well in such a dangerous situation.”

Tigre gently shook his head and showed his appreciation for the soldiers' work. Tigre was the one who took command in the forest.

Realizing the battle had ended, the soldiers lurking in the trees gradually gathered around Tigre.

“We managed to fend off the enemy by deceiving them. They'll be more wary of traps now, since they were completely cornered by our arrows.”

He spoke with sympathy at the end of his words in consideration for the Brune soldiers. Tigre silently shrugged his shoulders and pulled out an arrow from his quiver after having his soldiers prepare oil and a light.

He wrapped it in an oil soaked cloth and lit it on fire.

He aimed it toward the sky with his bow and drew the bowstring to its limit before firing it.

The flaming arrow burned brightly as it flew to the sky and scattered sparks. Tigre lit and fired another one. The soldiers applauded the spectacle, some even clapped.

“As expected of you. No one can fire to that height.”

One of the soldiers spoke up. All others present nodded in agreement.

“It's faster than sending a messenger by horse.”

The flaming arrows were a message to Viscount Augre, who was accompanied by two hundred soldiers at the riverside a long distance away. Two flaming arrows were shot from the forest, signaling for the destruction of the sandbags at the river upstream.

To be on the safe side, Viscount Augre waited for a group of ten cavalry messengers who were halfway between Augre and Tigre. They would certainly tell him directly.

When Tigre left the forest, he was greeted by Lim riding on horseback.

“Good work.”

Getting down from the horse, she tapped Tigre on the shoulder.

“Where is Ellen?”

“Eleanora-sama will return shortly. We have just received a message.”

Ellen separated from the main force with one thousand men to match the enemy. In a battle of even numbers, the silver-white haired Vanadis would win. As expected, she returned victorious.

“Still, that was surprising. I thought something else might happen.”

Lim muttered to herself as she looked to the north, shrouded in darkness. Tigre felt it as well. They had prepared a plan to win here assuming they would fight with the same number of troops.

It was a plan Tigre, Ellen, and the others devised. First, they would dam the flow of the river. Once the river was dry, they would withdraw to the forest.

“We should not have been able to finish the battle without fighting the troops across the river. We can't relax just because we managed to push them back with this. Since our numbers were the same, it should not have been so easy to divide their forces.”

If they had fought in a wide meadow, the first to fall back would lose. Tigre's shot at the General's head from the depths of the forest ended the battle; it was a shot that decided victory or defeat.

"Though it is a bit late, should we give chase?"

Tigre shook his head to Lim's question.

"I wish to reduce our sacrifices, even if it is only a little ."

His fight with Ganelon was not something necessary. In preparation for his war with Duke Thenardier, Tigre did not wish to lose any soldiers if he could help it, since there was no way for him to replenish his forces.

Ellen returned after leading her troops for over a quarter koku.

"We won."

With her chest held forward in a dignified manner suiting a warrior on horseback, Ellen spoke her short words. Lim looked at her expressionlessly.

"No one died?"

“Thirty were wounded, no one died.”

Leading one thousand cavalry and having that few wounded made it a complete victory on her part.

“How many of the enemies were taken out?”

“From our attack, we managed maybe three hundred.”

Ellen spoke while looking to the air, thinking of her experience.

“The enemy ran to the north. Judging by your face, it went well.”

Tigre nodded as Ellen asked about the results of battle.

“Yes. We could send a few people across the river and chase after them as well. Whether they decide to cross the water or not, we can spend the night near the river.”

Crossing the water depended on the soldiers' resolution. Without proper management, their path of retreat would be cut off. It was a suicidal action.

Having the resolution to cross immediately after losing the battle was not easy.

"I hope it ends with this."

Handling Thenardier alone was a difficult task. Tigre did not think he would be able to fend off others as well.

"For the time being, let us prepare camp. It is fine to use the one from yesterday."

Tigre and Ellen nodded to Lim's proposal. Though it was an unexpected fight, the morale from victory was an appreciated bonus.

At that time, Tigre noticed a young man walking toward them.

--- If I recall, he's Gerard.

He was the son of Viscount Augre, a man in his mid twenties with brown hair and the same bronze pupils as his father. He was lean, but, due to his clothing, he appeared heavy.

"So you were here."

Flush with excitement, Gerard spoke up with a heated voice.

“Really, I had heard of the strength and bravery of the Zhcted Army, but I'm impressed the rumors were true. Even in a foreign land, you have such good morale, stunning tactics that do not miss even the slightest chance, and the prowess to strike the enemy. Earl Vorn, you have such a reliable ally. I am envious of your luck.”

Gerard spoke words of praise. Tigre nodded while Lim knit her eyebrows.

However, before they could make words of rebuttal, Ellen settled the two down.

After confirming Lim had settled down, Ellen called out to Gerard who had turned bright red.

“Lord Gerard. I thank you for your kind praise, but such words can be harmful. You should make sure to watch what you say in the future.”

Although her tone was gentle, the atmosphere released by Ellen, despite her kind appearance, pressed down heavily.

“I suppose so. It must have been difficult to create such an opportunity for us to take advantage of.”

Gerard, at a loss for words, returned a flat response.

“Lord Gerard, it is as you say.”

During a pause in their conversation, Tigre spoke some words of appreciation to Gerard before ordering the troops to make preparations for the night. He looked up at Ellen on her horse and sighed.

“Please don't speak or behave in a way that will anger others. The troops have finally settled down.”

“Given his words, didn't it seem like he thought nothing of you?”

Ellen returned a dissatisfied expression. Lim also agreed.

“Isn't it frustrating to claim all your decisions and actions were simply due to fortune?”

“Well, that's just how things are.”

Tigre's face resembled someone who had simply given up caring.

“I am troubled by your attitude.”

This army, after all, had gathered to oppose the threat of Thenardier and Ganelon. The largest problem as of now was the oddity of the General, Tigre.

Even though he was their leader, he was not particularly famous, and his skill with the bow, while acknowledged by those of the Zhcted Army, was still despised by many of the soldiers of Brune.

The people of Brune did not know what Tigre could do.

That was why Lim wanted to build the foundation of the army upon Tigre's ability to bring the troops victory. So long as Tigre did not do anything drastic, his standing would not improve.

“It seems you met with severe casualties”

Marquis Greast spoke indifferently to the man who returned in defeat. The General simply bowed his head without responding.

When they reached the riverside, the Ganelon Army had been reduced to four thousand, having lost nearly 30% of their troops. It was his luck to leave only with defeat.

The troops remaining, either scattered about after having run away or reorganizing in the ranks, numbered forty-five hundred at most.

“... Fifteen hundred have died.”

Because Greast muttered in a small voice, the General did not hear. He simply looked at Greast who smiled sarcastically.

“There must be some punishment for this failure. For example, the [Dancing Mask].”

All color drained from the General's face in an instant.

The [Dancing Mask] was a cruel method of execution Greast designed several years before.

An iron collar was affixed to the neck of the man to be executed. After that, they wore a mask which covered the entire head. The only opening was a single hole above the ear.

Water was poured in through the hole and it was plugged. The punished individual could not breathe and struggled about, looking as if he were dancing on the ground.

Duke Ganelon had used this method of execution numerous times as a warning to those who might act against him.

Seeing the General's expression, ready to weep at any moment, Greast laughed as if it were a joke. His gaze wandered through the air.

“General. Wait until morning and cross the river. Withdraw after that.”

“The enemy... You want us to launch a night time attack, then.”

“If you go that far, you will not be able to return before the flow of water has been restored. It's enough to simply show yourself for the time being.”

Greast realized the enemy's intent was to drive them away.

They did not have the energy to fight the Ganelon Army. Greast was not the kind of person to miss this.

It would take a lot of energy to cross the river in their situation, but should they spend the night there, the enemy would become fatigued out of fear of a night time attack.

--- I wonder how this will affect Duke Ganelon's image.

The reason Greast forcibly attacked Tigre was because he was asked to by Duke Ganelon when they shared a meal two moons ago.

“This is an embarrassment. There are many aristocrats watching both Thenardier and me to decide who they will side with.”

“... Rather than having him join, would it not be more convenient to simply crush him?”

“Whether it be territory, money, or goods, it is always best to have more, and the fewer people we need to distribute them to, the better... Still, a few more [Companions] would be good, Marquis.”

At that time, Greast saw Ganelon's expression. There was both fear and pressure, as if he were listening to the voice of an evil spirit. His entire body was assaulted.

“And what if Vorn decides to submit?”

“We need only deprive all villages and towns under his charge of their goods and capital. Should he become our [Friend], he will lead the attack on Rance.”

--- This man is terrible. I never wish to antagonize him.

Though Greast was a man with nerves who would not bother batting an eyebrow from severe torture or cruel execution, he was no match for Ganelon.

And so, Greast borrowed soldiers from Ganelon, who had fought and lost in battle.

If his victory against Ganelon's army was spread, support for Tigre's cause may increase. There was the possibility that those who joined Ganelon may betray him and rush into action using this as an opportunity.

“First of all, I must settle this matter with the Vanadis Eleanora. I wonder what wonderful things I can do.”

A thin smile appeared on Greast's face as he continued plotting.

The Silver Meteor Army drank a toast once the Ganelon Army withdrew. They had bought the liquor from a nearby town, and the soldiers were dancing about . The villagers who fled from the Ganelon Army also joined in the celebration.

Tigre allowed this for the purpose of maintaining morale as well as to allow the people of Zhcted and Brune to communicate with each other openly.

Though the meals were no different from usual, several bonfires were lit to brush off the cold, giving the entire area a bright and warm atmosphere.

As expected, feelings of victory and large amounts of alcohol blew their anger away. The fights between citizens of Brune and of Zhcted had changed to peaceful songs and contests of strength.

When the party was peaking, Tigre quietly left.

He walked to a distance where the clamor was faint and lay on the ground to look at the stars. Because he had been given drink repeatedly, he was considerably intoxicated.

The night sky was cloudy; the stars were not visible.

Letting out a deep breath, he was surprised to smell the alcohol in his body.

--- I can't simply celebrate with this victory.

Duke Thenardier was not the only one. Duke Ganelon was an enemy as well, and his allies were few in number.

--- I rarely leave Alsace, and yet the two greatest aristocrats are after my life.

Many thoughts emerged and disappeared in his head. His mind would not settle at all. As he thought to leave so he could go to sleep, someone sat next to him.

“Were you waiting for someone to wake you up?”

It was Ellen wearing her normal clothes; Arifal was in her right hand rather than her waist. It seems she also had much to drink, since her face was considerably flushed.

“No, I didn't fall asleep.”

Tigre sat up as he answered. The thoughts that danced in his mind a moment before suddenly disappeared.

“Thank you, Ellen.”

“What, that's rather abrupt.”

Not caring that Ellen was looking at him curiously, Tigre continued to look at the sky and spoke.

“It feels like my mind has never once left Alsace, at least until a while ago. Whether it was for war or visiting the King's Capital, it was simply my duty as an aristocrat of Brune. Though Alsace is such a small land when looking at a map of Brune Kingdom... it was too large for me. It was more than enough.”

Tigre wondered why he felt like talking about such things with her in the corner of his mind, but that thought disappeared at once.

He was grateful to Ellen who listened in silence. Tigre continued speaking.

“However, the world is not just Alsace. It isn't just Brune, either. Zhcted as well.”

It would be impossible to fight otherwise.

To defend his people, he needed more allies. However, if he wished for more allies, he must be able to defend them. He must secure food, clothing, housing, and security.

"I knew nothing of this until now. Even though I still don't understand it... I wish to express my gratitude to you, Ellen, for giving me this opportunity."

They had met on the battlefield. There was no chance they would meet otherwise.

Tigre, who had never looked at Brune as a whole, found interest in Zhcted.

The little arguments between the Zhcted and Brune soldiers which happened every day also forced him to think.

An aristocrat's private army was, in effect, the people within his domain. His people had houses and families, they lived their every day lives. Though each had his own sense of justice, there was no need for them to fight for it.

Because they were commanded, because they received pay, because they could eat, because they could become distinguished.

That is why they fought. Those who fought through their loyalty and trust in their Commander were very few.

He wished to know more about his people in Alsace. He desired to confirm it once again.

“... To think you would say this so suddenly.”

Ellen smiled bitterly and reached out to Tigre, entwining her finger in his dull red hair as she pat and stroked his head.

“There's no need to thank me. Even in these circumstances, I doubt there's been anyone else to have thought this way. You're fine the way you are.”

A wind from the Silver Flash in Ellen's right hand blew , showing its consent. Perhaps it was the alcohol, but the wind carried the sweet fragrance of the Vanadis, surprising Tigre.

He became anxious, finally realizing her fingers were running through his hair. Ellen continued patting his

head as she smiled. Tigre could not easily tell her to stop, but if he remained as he is, he was certain she would hear his heart beating violently.

“What's wrong? You suddenly went silent.”

“N, no... Should we return soon? I think we've talked the alcohol off.”

Ellen's face seemed to inflate in an ill-humored manner upon hearing his moderate proposal.

“Let's stay a bit longer. Lim will be annoying if we go back now.”

“Annoying?”

“She won't leave me alone, she'll force me to drink my alcohol in moderation since I'm the leader, and if she drinks any, she'll spit it out all over someone's face.”

Tigre desperately held back a laugh when he imagined Lim spewing alcohol.

“But if you stay any longer, won't Lim just be more angry?”

Before he finished speaking, Ellen's finger stopped moving.

“... You really need to understand where you stand.”

While thinking about her words, his reaction was too slow. Ellen quickly moved behind Tigre and held his red head in a tight embrace.

Ellen was neither angry nor sad; however, Tigre was confused by the soft twin bulges pushing strongly against the back of his head. Though he tried to escape in his panic, Ellen simply pressed against him with her entire body.

The two mounds with rich curves were deformed every time Ellen moved due to their mysterious elasticity. The faint smell of sweat and the feeling transmitted through the back of his head strongly stimulated Tigre's imagination, making the blood rush to his face.



「おまえの背中って、**案外**大きいんだな……」
酒屋おじいのは見や耳をくちつけた。

"I got it. I give, I give."

Tigre acknowledged his defeat quickly. *Really, to think this person who can defeat one thousand cavalry on her own and can boast of many military exploits can be so possessive.* Still, she was never this way before her soldiers.

Even after hearing his words of surrender, Ellen did not part from Tigre. Her thin arms wrapped around his neck as she entrusted her body to him.

"Your back, it's surprisingly large..."

Ellen gently grasped Tigre's hand.

"Ellen?"

"You don't like this?"

He shook his head. Ellen did not bother to say what she was thinking as she poked, stroked, and played with Tigre's hand.

"That's right. Your face looked miserable when that bastard was holding my hand."

Suddenly, Marquis Greast popped into his head.

“I thought I was pretty calm then.”

Tigre tilted his head. He was certain he had suppressed his anxiety during the negotiations.

“No, it felt like you would strangle him at any moment . Were you jealous?”

A sweet sound tickled his ear as she teased him.

Rather than envy, it was more akin to pure anger. Since he could not precisely distinguish his emotions at the time, Tigre spoke frankly.

“If it were not such a situation, I would have given him a sound beating.”

A faint laughter rode the wind.

“You really are cute.”

Ellen's face expressed her happiness; however, it was out of Tigre's view.

“... Can I stay like this for a while?”

Is she still drunk? Having been teased with a gentle voice, Tigre could say nothing. Though she pleaded with him like a child, her body was hardly suitable to match her tone – specifically, her large breasts.

The two fell silent, though for how long is uncertain. Suddenly, Ellen placed her head on Tigre's shoulder. Tigre's ears could hear her gentle breathing.

--- That's right, her face was completely red when she came here.

Just by turning his head a little, he could see Ellen's beautiful face. Her face showed no sign of unease or fear. The shape of her face, her fair skin, her silver-white hair was visible; though it was regrettable, her long eyelashes covered her lovely eyes.



If he moved even more, he could softly place his lips on her. Not on her lips, perhaps, but possibly over her eyes. Ellen would hardly notice.

“... Let's head back.”

Approaching his limit, Tigre managed to force down his desires. It would be unfair to do such a thing to someone who was asleep.

Slowly inhaling the cold night air, he exhaled deeply, removing the heat circulating throughout his body.

Even when sleeping, Ellen did not release Arifal. Using his remaining hand, he supported her body and stood up, carrying her on his back.

The bonfires still burned brightly, and the soldiers' voices had become more faint. He did not wish to be seen by the men, and it was important that he get rid of the excess energy in his body.

“... I'll take a detour.”

Even so, he wanted to stay with her a bit longer. While thinking about the comfortable warmth against his back, Tigre started walking slowly so as to not wake Ellen.

Presuвет
Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower

North of the Orange Plains, beyond the river, several villages dotted the surroundings amidst a sea of vast vineyards. The time of the harvest had passed; the earth had a dreary color and was filled with branches barren of all leaves.

Perhaps it was also due to the weather; the mid-afternoon sky was covered in gray clouds.

--- It's not raining. Even if it doesn't today, it will tomorrow. How troublesome.

While riding on horseback along a path through the vineyards, Tigre looked up at the dim sky.

Tigre was visiting the largest village in the area, Saunier. He was amongst ten people without armor; at most, they were dressed lightly wearing only swords at their waist. Since they were all battle hardened, they were a strong fighting force.

“Rather than a village, it feels like a small town.”

Rurick advanced to ride next to Tigre and spoke his thoughts as he looked at the landscape of Saunier. Tigre also returned words of consent.

From above, the village was shaped like a circle. It was surrounded by a stone wall to an adult's height, and the gates were made of three pieces of thick, laminated oak planks, each door at one of four corners of the town. They were painted with plaster to protect against fire.

“Saunier is the center of all the local villages.”

Augre looked on while continuing the explanation. Given how relaxed he looked, it must have been a peaceful village.

“Most village meetings are done here. There is also an open market here, though there are villages closer to the highways than Saunier.”

There were many purposes for Tigre's visit to Saunier. One was to grant some sense of relief to the people by having Augre, their Feudal Lord, appear. Another was to confirm the situation amongst the villages, and the final reason was to determine their future actions.

“Oh, you seem to be in a good mood. Tigre-san, are we staying here longer?”

While looking at the stalls which sold fish-kebabs, a man standing next to Rurick heard them speak. He brushed his disheveled brown hair aside in a clumsy manner, showing his profile. He had a somewhat mischievous expression.

The man's name was Aram, and he was a member of the Zhcted Army. When Tigre was a captive, they had played a variety of games, such as chess, cards, and ninepin, together..

“We will be here for a while. Viscount Augre and I will be heading to the meeting place first.”

He responded to Aram's question made in slight jest; some laughter sounded from the surrounding men.

If he had come only to confirm the safety of the village, even with attendants, Tigre would only require five people.

The reason he came with ten people was due to the existence of Aram's scouting unit.

Although Ellen had ten people scouting the Orange Plains, it was Aram's group of five which discovered the Ganelon Army.

This morning, Tigre called for them and praised them for their distinguished services.

“Although you helped immensely, there is little I can do. Still, I would like to do what I can for you, so long as it is within my abilities.”

Aram responded by saying, “There is a village one koku away. We would like to rest there if possible.”

In a situation in which he had little maneuverability about the Orange Plains and no knowledge as to whether Massas would appear, it was a considerably unreasonable demand. While Aram spoke in a light hearted manner, Tigre took him seriously.

However, Tigre knew Viscount Augre would attend a meeting at Saunier in the morning before he called for them.

“Though it is necessary to receive Viscount Augre's approval, I believe we can go there without armor.”

When he told them Augre had consented, they acted happily like children, despite nearing the age of 30. They had now advanced ahead of Tigre and were looking about in interest.

The streets were flat and average in size. There were fences and pillars found at crossroads, and the streets were lined with rows of stone, brick, and slate houses with circular chimneys.

Children were scribbling on the ground or running about gardens.

Everywhere they looked, the village gave off a rustic impression, but with how well built the gate, tavern, and general store were, it was clear this village had many travelers.

“Although it was true of Tigre-san's land of Alsace, this place also makes me feel that Brune life is not so different from ours.”

“I know what you're talking about. I thought it would be more like Muozinel.”

“Let's eat for the time being. Then we can look for women. I haven't seen a beautiful woman in a long time.”

“That's a good idea. I'd like a good bed, too.”

While listening to the soldiers happily conversing, Tigre arrived at the meeting point.

It was a private house approximately three times the size of the average household in the area, built with stone and bricks; its roof was made of clay.

While helping Viscount Augre dismount his horse, Tigre spoke to Aram and the others.

“You have one and a half koku to do as you wish. Make sure to avoid trouble.”

Hearing they would have time to themselves, their faces changed. They turned and ran without looking back.

Rurick watched in amazement as he watched them leave his sight before shrugging his shoulders.

“Rurick, you can go as well. We will be fine, so why not go join Aram?”

“Thank you for your kind words, but Vanadis-sama and Lord Limlisha would surely kill me if I do.”

Though Rurick spoke jokingly, his eyes were serious.

“Then Batran, you may go relax.”

Even if three people decreased to two, it was not particularly significant, and he would not have much to do if he remained.

Viscount Augre's subordinates accompanied him. Tigre and Rurick passed through the entrance to the meeting place inside the large stone building.

A wool carpet lay at the center of the room with a long table and chairs placed on top. Enshrined in the back wall were statues of the ten Gods.

After greeting all the gathered village leaders, Tigre sat in his seat. Augre was the primary speaker, so Tigre simply remained silent and listened.

Though there were no special conversations in particular, he was able to confirm the good news that there was no damage. The story ended in a half koku and the meeting was disbanded.

--- No information on the King's Capital...

Though it did not show on Tigre's face, he was slightly disappointed.

For those who do not leave their village, travelers and merchants were precious sources of information and entertainment from the outside world. Hotel rooms and meals were offered to them, and the number of villagers requesting to speak to them was hardly a few.

Though Tigre expected to receive some form of information on the King's Capital, nothing was spoken. It ended in a miss.

“It ended early.”

After leaving the meeting place, Rurick scratched his bald head while watching the surroundings. It has only been a half koku since Aram and his men left. They would not return for a while.

“I wonder if I should have arranged for a room to rest in or not.”

Augre smiled wryly as he stroked his chin. Though the village chiefs offered a feast and bedding arrangements, they were planning to return quickly. Though he could call them back and have it arranged, Augre was not a domineering Lord.

“I will find a place to rest. Viscount Augre, you should return to camp early and take a break.”

“If you say so. Earl Vorn, you should also take a break. Even if it is only one koku, it will help you relax.”

“No, I...”

Tigre spoke hesitantly and shook his head softly to the old Viscount. Augre nodded with a smile. It was a modest attitude characteristic of a person with much modesty; still, it helped Tigre relax.

“I suppose so. Thank you.”

Thanking him, Tigre and Rurick left the old Viscount.

“What do you want to do, Rurick?”

“If I might have permission, I would first like some alcohol. Either wine or a honey sake would be nice to have.”

“I suppose so. Let's go look for a bar.”

“The inn, general store, and tavern are near the gate. I saw many people entering, and the signboard had a wine bottle. I believe there were many cheerful voices there as well.”

The inside was not particularly wide, and the fire was not lit since there were lamps and the windows were all widely open. Along the shelves were bottles of various shape and size.

Half the seats were filled. Tigre and Rurick went deeper into the shop and sat at a table near the window. A fat, middle aged woman came to take their order.

“Did you want some beer? If you want, we can make you something light to eat as well.”

They ordered some bread and cheese and pickled cabbage to eat.

Soon afterward, pitchers filled to the brim with alcohol and plates with food were placed before them.

After a toast, Rurick drank quickly.

“A good alcohol. Do you like it?”

“It's not bad. It's light and has a good flavor.”

While cheerfully ordering another beer, Rurick reached for the pickled cabbage. After taking a bite, he let out a sound showing his interest. Though Tigre also tried the pickles, he did not find them as interesting.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Though it looks the same, the taste is different from the one of my lands.”

“Same here. It tasted different from when I ate them in LeitMeritz.”

It was not limited to these dishes. Whether it be the bread or soup, though they looked the same, they had a different flavor. Tigre thought it somewhat refreshing; apparently Rurick did as well.

“Still, it is quite good on its own.”

Rurick spoke in a somewhat exaggerated manner upon seeing Tigre suddenly frown.

“You're looking quite glum.”

“Oh? I didn't think it was that easy to see.”

Tigre gave a noncommittal answer as he gazed at the scenery outside the window, though the bald man did not pay any heed.

“Don't make that face and just have a drink... is what I'd like to say, but given your worries, I suppose you can't think about drinking. Well, if you can talk about your worries, then feel free to speak.”

Tigre looked steadily at Rurick after hearing his unexpected words and smiled.

“I thought about this before, but why did you decide to follow me in there earlier?”

Rurick smiled in a pretentious manner.

“Are you anxious?”

Tigre nodded, seemingly with his entire body. Rurick answered after taking a large drink.

“It's an embarrassing story, so I may need to drink a bit more. Simply put, I need to relax some.”

Rurick continued happily as he nibbled on some cheese.

“Before I met you, I was the number one archer of LeitMeritz with a record of two-hundred-seventy alsin. I had never met anyone within Zhcted who could shoot any further than that. Even in the King's Capital of Silesia, the limit anyone could supposedly reach was two-hundred-fifty alsin.”

Rurick continued speaking conceited words.

On the continent, it was said the maximum range of a bow is approximately two-hundred-fifty alsin (approximately two-hundred-fifty meters). The average archer could not even reach one-hundred-fifty.

“But you... in that kind of situation, well, normally you could not even pull out half your abilities. Still, you used such a terrible bow and aimed accurately at the leg of a human running along the ramparts, and you're five years

younger than me... There were many things that were destroyed in that moment. In the end, you spared my life."

It was a story of when Tigre had just become Ellen's captive. One might think it was an old story given how Tigre and Rurick were recalling that time while drinking beer.

"I found you interesting when I talked to you."

"Thanks for that."

Hearing a somewhat crooked compliment, Tigre obediently gave his words of thanks. Though both had been drinking, it was still a bit embarrassing.

"By the way, what's worrying you?"

Rurick returned to topic after ordering his third drink. Though his breath was tinged with the smell of alcohol, he looked earnestly at Tigre.

"I suppose I'll ask you seriously – The Zhcted soldiers are following me, but is that really okay?"

"Frankly speaking, that's a difficult question."

Though his tone was serious, Tigre was at a loss for words. He was ruffling his red hair to reflect that.

“--- Every night, I look at the sky. The empty sky here is different from the empty sky of Alsace. When I remember the night sky I saw in LeitMeritz, it feels so distant.”

He was far from his hometown, continuing a battle in a cold plain during the winter.

They must have been tired both physically and mentally. Although Ellen was commanding them, should it not be for battle, they may have thrown all aside and gone home. Tigre asked himself these questions once again when Aram pointed out his desire to rest in the village.

These doubts could not be cleared by Ellen or Lim, which is why he spoke to Rurick.

It was because he was a soldier. Though he acted as Tigre's escort at times like today, he was still one amongst thousands of soldiers he would command in battle. Basically, Rurick worked hard on a daily basis and was fundamentally no different from the others.

Tigre wanted to have a look at the soldiers that day. He wanted to hear their views and welcomed them to speak without reserve.

“You're thinking too much.”

Rurick dismissed Tigre's worries.

“Vanadis-sama's predecessor lasted for a short two years. Anyone who lasts more than five years is considered to have lasted a long time. In LeitMeritz, we always follow whatever expedition they may undertake. So long as the soldiers have food and a salary, their morale will not fall.”

“And what of an enemy attack?”

“We only need to follow Vanadis-sama. Batran-san said the people of Alsace have a fear of fighting; they lack the courage and will to fight. However, they fought because of their leader. In other words, they fought because they believed in you.”

“I see... So that's how it is.”

Tigre finished his drink in a single gulp and let out a deep breath.

“Are you feeling better after hearing what I said?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

If the number of soldiers had been switched, that is, if soldiers of Brune outnumbered those of Zhcted, their battle in Alsace may have been different.

Naturally, Ellen and Lim commanded Zhcted's soldiers while Augre commanded Brune's soldiers.

Many people had gathered together.

Even then, Tigre was the General. There were many things he needed to know, needed to learn. It was necessary for him to learn the ways of countries other than Brune and Alsace in order to gain trust.

“You don't need to worry. We're fine as we are. By the way---”

Rurick lowered in tone unexpectedly.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. There is one more thing I would like to ask you.”

“What?”

Tigre had released his attention in his moment of relief . He began to drink his beer as he prompted Rurick to continue speaking.

“Between Lord Limlisha and Miss Teita, who would you choose?”

Tigre spat his beer out slightly.

“Wha, where is this coming from?”

“It's a bit of a hot topic. It seems spring has come for that frigid woman... Excuse me, that was rude. It must be the alcohol.”

“... We are seen in that way?”

Though he did not realize, he was looking down and was slightly agitated, Tigre carefully asked.

“I honestly don't know. However, Limlisha, as Vanadis-sama's adjutant, has never been close to another man. That's why there's a rumor that she speaks easily with Lord Tigrevurmud. Teita goes without saying.”

Though Rurick responded as if it was someone else's concern, his eyes clearly showed his interest.

“It seems people are making bets as well. Will you choose Limlisha? Or will you choose Teita? Incidentally, since you are an aristocrat, there has been a suggestion of you choosing both.”

Tigre felt a headache and began scratching his head. He could not afford to think about such things when dealing with Thenardier and Ganelon.

Besides, following his contract, both he and Alsace belonged to Ellen, even if it was a verbal promise.

At the moment, Ellen had not made a declaration. Though ambiguous, their relationship could not remain as is indefinitely. Still, it was a relationship far from love when he thought about it.

“By the way, if we bring peace to Alsace, what will you do?”

While Tigre was trying to think of a response to his blunt opponent's question, which had sealed all means of escape. He decided to go with that.

“Me? I will return to LeitMeritz, though there is no telling what will happen after that.”

He responded without hesitation. Though Tigre knew he was popular with women, he was impressed that he spoke without hesitation.

“Oh, like I thought, Tigre-san, Rurick.”

A voice was abruptly heard from outside the window. Aram and the others walked toward him with a smile on their face and either a honeyed kabob or bread and jam in their hands.

“It looks like you're having fun.”

Tigre nodded and laughed. Aram thrust his face toward the window.

“Oh, cabbage. Mind if I try one?”

“How about some of the meat from your skewer then?”
”

“It's pigeon. It's pretty tough.”

Aram passed Tigre a kabob and pulled out a cabbage. Rurick looked bitterly at him.

“You shouldn't take advantage of Lord Tigrevurmud so much... He's not a prisoner anymore.”

It was true he was not a prisoner of war anymore, but since he had received the pigeon meat, Tigre remained quiet. It certainly was tough, but it had a deep flavor.

“This is delicious. Where do they sell it?”

“I'll show you. By the way, are you going to the Mansion after this, Tigre-san?”

“Man... Mansion...?”

Tension quickly appeared on Tigre's face. On the other hand, Rurick seemed interested.

“They have one in this village?”

“There's a sign showing worship of Iarilo here. There aren't many people, and the girls don't look all that great, but it's cheap.”

Iarilo was one of the divine Goddesses of both Brune and Zhcted who represented a good harvest and lust. Having her on a sign in the village showed there was a facility present.

“... Will you be able to leave the village in a half koku?”

Tigre said that for the time being.

“If it's a half koku, we probably can.”

Rurick gave his response. It seems he completely felt like going.

--- *Well, what should I do...*

Tigre understood the purpose of Mansions. They were located even in the town of Celesta where his residence was. He also saw them in the camps at Dinant, soliciting the soldiers.

However, Tigre and Ellen had given strict orders that prostitutes were never to be seen amongst the soldiers of the Silver Meteor Army. Rather than calling them fastidious, they were fearful the prostitutes may spread sickness, deteriorate morale, or act as foreign spies.

“So, what will you do, Tigre-san?”

Aram asked, pushing Tigre into a panic.

“No, I'm fine.”

The soldiers behind Aram began to whisper.

“Look, I told you. Tigre-san can already see his family.”

“That's right. He can always see Teita.”

“Also, our second in command never gets angry. The day before yesterday, no, maybe it was before that, she was tugging on Tigre-san's hair when he overslept.”

Certainly, his hair was pulled on, but Teita and Lim's angry faces appeared in his head. Ellen's face appeared as well.

He could not imagine it well. Rather than imagining Ellen scold him, he imagined her staring at him with an ill-humored expression. Her bright, red eyes surpassed rubies of the highest class.

He imagined Teita blotting out the tears in her hazel eyes while complaining to him. As for Lim, though she kept her mind and expression calm, her eyes would show her amazement, contempt, frustration, and dissatisfaction.

“... All of you want to spend the rest of your time like this?”

Ruffling his red hair, Tigre let out a deep sigh as he looked at the Zhcted soldiers.

“While I won't say as much as Lim, I will admit this could lead to a disturbance in military discipline.”

Aram and the others looked at each other. Ignoring their reactions, Tigre continued to speak.

“Now, I feel like being alone, so I'll return to our meeting point. Rurick, I leave them in your care. I will say this once again. Do not cause trouble. Also, don't regret how you spend the money you worked hard to earn. Finally, you will remain on schedule and will not speak of this once we return – got it?”

Aram and the others saluted Tigre in a relaxed manner

Tigre's words were an implicit sign of his permission. When he told them to not regret how they spent their money, he was telling them to choose a healthy person.

Since Tigre did not feel like joining them, he left Rurick to take charge of them; however, it was true he wanted to be alone so he could think about what Rurick said when he spoke of his troubles.

Tigre rode his horse alone along the prairie at the end of the day. The sky was covered with gray clouds dying the land in shadows.

He suddenly recalled his conversation with Rurick and the others; he let out a deep sigh.

Tigre was a 16 year old man. It was not as if he lacked an interest in women.

However, as the Lord of Alsace, his desire to hunt with his bow was greater, and, now, he did not have the time to think about such things.

--- That's right. I don't have the luxury.

From the time he had met Marquis Greast, Tigre had thought about many things. He had not yet told them to anyone. It was closer to a desire than something he thought feasible.

--- Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon, what can I do about their tyranny?

It was not something for a small aristocrat like Tigre to be concerned with, but he could not help but think it was impossible to avoid battle with them. Such thoughts had lurked in his heart ever since he heard the rumors in the camps at Dinant.

--- If the King recovers from his illness, it might be resolved for the time being.

Still, Duke Thenardier retained his grudge. Though it was an issue which should have been directed only at himself, it was a problem since it was aimed at all people in Alsace.

However, Tigre's thoughts ended here.

After he met with Ellen, Tigre's view of the world extended far beyond Alsace. Though his knowledge was something acquired from Lim's education, he could not take it all in stride. Even if he had a vague idea of what was in store for him in the future, that was his current limit.

The cold wind blew by Tigre, returning him from his thoughts.

--- I'll reach the river soon.

Though he was riding through the thicket on his horse, he could still see ahead of him properly. However, since the sky had become dark, he should have been more careful.

With a few dozen strides to the river remaining, he stopped moving and took precaution.

--- *The sound of water...*

Though he could not see well from the bushes, he knew someone or something was there.

--- *It would be good if it was just a small animal coming for some water.*

When he thought that, he heard the sound of the water mix with the sound of the wind. The noise of something flapping tickled his ear; something was flying.

As he reached for the bow in his saddle, a black object came flying before his eyes. It was about the size of a puppy. Tigre caught it with both his hands as it stared at him intently.

Though it seemed to be jet black in the darkness, it had rusty green scales, a color he was familiar with. It had horns on the back of its head and wings similar to a bat on its back.

It was a Dragon; a small, infant Dragon, and it was the source of the strange sound he heard a moment ago – the sound of the Dragon flying.

“You... Why am I seeing you here?”

To calm his surprised horse, Tigre covered the young Dragon. It looked like Ellen's pet Dragon, but it should not have been in a place like this.

“You're definitely a distinct Dragon... You're really meek, aren't you. I wonder if all baby Dragons are like this.”

Tigre held the creature in his hand. Though it had sharp eyes and looked as if it were appraising Tigre, it showed no signs of aggression.

“--- Lunie-chan?”

A woman's voice called out from somewhere. At that moment, the young Dragon flapped its wings vigorously; its eyes were wide open in fright. When he released his grip momentarily, the young Dragon jumped on Tigre's back and placed its feet on his head, as if hiding its body.

Hearing that, a shadow appeared, shaking the nearby bushes.

“Lunie-cha---”

It was a woman. She was taller than Tigre and had eyes the color of a beryl and golden hair.

When her eyes met Tigre's, they opened widely. She gasped and was at a loss for words. Tigre stared at her in surprise, unable to move.

She was not wearing a single piece of cloth and stood completely exposed, her body wet with water, to Tigre.

She had delicate shoulders, ample bosom, narrow hips, and long, slender legs.

After a silence reaching a count of ten, Tigre's brain managed to squeeze out some words.

"Cl, clothes...?"

However, his thought process was not normal.

As if reacting to Tigre's voice, the infant Dragon's body began to shake. The woman, also reacting to his words, began moving.

"Lunie-chan!"

The woman kicked off the ground, chasing after it so it would not escape. She moved as if she had not noticed Tigre's presence and stumbled after her fourth step. With her posture broken, Tigre moved his arms out to catch her on reflex and fell embracing her.



「あらあら。
ごめんなさい」

夜空を背景にして、
美しい裸身が眼前に展開された。

Perhaps due to the chill of the river water, her cold body made him feel warm. He could clearly feel her soft skin and two voluptuous bulges.

Though his back was to the ground, he barely felt it. With the majority of his consciousness taken away, he could not even think of anything else.

Though the two were mutually frozen, Tigre tried to move his hand somehow. His fingers brushed the glossy skin along her hips; a bewitching sound tickled Tigre's ear.

However, it had removed the tension. She finally sat up, drops of water spilling from her golden hair down her collarbone, collecting in the valley between her breasts.

Against the background of the night sky, her beautiful, naked body stole his eyes once again. Though he wanted to offer his clothes so she could conceal herself, it was clearly impossible in this posture. Unable to do anything, he shut his eyes strongly and covered his face with his hand.

“Oh my, I apologize.”

Her gentle voice fell from above; it was impossible for him not to hear it. When he thought he wanted to retreat, he heard a voice from a distance.

“Sophie? Since it's this dark, it will be hard to find Lunie...”

The voice broke off as footsteps approached. Tigre's instincts perceived an unprecedented danger. While Tigre wanted to escape immediately, the woman was still on top of him.

Though he may have been able to escape if he pushed her away, he could not muster any strength.

“--- Oh?”

Hearing a voice tinged with anger, Tigre felt a sense of hopelessness.

He was not scolded or hit.

Even so, contempt was clearly in her voice and gaze. Tigre felt it may have been better if he was beaten, since things had never been this painful.

In the General's tent were five men and women: Tigre, Ellen, Lim, Teita, and Sophie. Tigre sat in a chair, half encircled by the others. He felt he should have gotten Augre to join as well.

Still, the modest old Viscount was tired and was resting early. Though Tigre did not want him to overwork himself, he sincerely felt it was a failure on his part to allow him to leave early.

“Your training is not enough.”

Lim looked down at him with eyes clearly expressing contempt. Ellen, though not as much as Lim, also looked at him in anger and shock.

“You'll fall on the battlefield if you can't react quickly to a surprise. What would you do if a beautiful assassin came? Wouldn't you die?”

“Tigre-sama...”

Teita had brought snacks for everyone. While pouring wine, Teita looked at Tigre in pity. She called out his name, clearly showing her mental state. It was harsh.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Tigrevurmud. I am one of the Vanadis, Sophia Obertas, and wielder of the ^{Taima no Fukkou} [Barrier of Evil Retreat]. You may call me Sophie.”

Ignoring the atmosphere, Sophie introduced herself with a kind smile, as if she were a Goddess of ancient myth.

Her body was wrapped in a light green dress, her golden hair, now dry, waved gently. The various jewels decorating her body only added to her flower-like beauty .

Of the four women present, only she, the victim in a sense, spoke to him with kind words and gentle expressions. It was quite odd.

Lunie was held in her thin arms. The infant Dragon with rusty green scales had lowered its limbs and no longer flapped its wings. It remained obedient like a doll; it had given up on running away.

--- This person is definitely a Vanadis.

Though different from Ellen and Ludmira, she was also a beautiful woman. She had an intimidating

demeanor and remained calm before Tigre, despite having been seen naked. Tigre bowed his head and smiled in a carefree manner to calm his nerves.

“I am Tigrevurmud Vorn. I apologize for my rudeness before.”

“Oh my, I should be the one to thank you. You tried to catch me when I fell over.”

“It's a load off my mind if you say that.”

“It was my first time being held so closely by a gentleman, I was surprised. You made quite an impressive first impression.”

The Vanadis giggled, her golden hair shaking. Seeing her gaze directed toward his waist rather than his body, he felt he was unjustly suspected.

“So, why did you show up in a place like this?”

While fiddling with her silver-white hair, Ellen asked in a blunt voice.

“You don't know?”

Tigre asked Ellen in surprise. She was taking a bath in the river. Though he thought their conversation had concluded, it seems he was wrong.

“It seems he returned a half koku early.”

Though Ellen was curious about Sophie's sudden appearance, she was pleased to meet her again.

“I was surprised you took Lunie. Honestly, I didn't think Tigre would be back this early, so I gave you time to take a bath to wash off your sweat while we were waiting for him to return. I didn't expect this to happen.”

Ellen's words permitted no chance for him to speak, though the thorns in her words had receded.

“My, I do so love Lunie-chan.”

Noticing her soften, Sophie tilted her head and looked at Ellen.

The last time the two had met was in the King's Capital of Zhcted, Silesia. Ellen asked her a favor and promised she would let Sophie play with Lunie in return. Sophie loved Dragons, especially this baby with a terrible face.

"I got it. You can play with Lunie."

Though he did not know what happened, Tigre felt a deep sympathy for the young Dragon which was being held. It stared at Teita with an unusual interest.

"I came here with official duties from our country. His Majesty has become impatient with your absence, and he has heard an interesting story from Brune. He ordered I go as a messenger."

"Messenger?"

"It happened a few days after we met, probably about ten days."

Ellen sighed upon hearing Sophie's words.

"Impatient, is he... But is this really the sort of duty he should be giving to you?"

"Well, it was unavoidable."

Sophie's gaze moved to her bishop staff. The mysterious wand had many circular rings protruding which combined to form an elaborate golden pillar.

“My Light ^{Zaht} Flower should work better than yours, right?”

Tigre recognized the word referred to her bishop staff, her [Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool].

--- *Certainly, it would be different if Ellen's sword or Ludmira's spear were sent as messengers.*

Sophie's bishop staff appeared to have a lower war potential than any other [Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool]. It looked more like a sacred treasure than a weapon.

“Tigre. I'll tell you this now, but if you do anything to Sophie, she may very well hurt you badly. Though it will hurt being cut with a sword, it can be more painful if she crushes your bones.”

Tigre returned to his normal thoughts after hearing Ellen's grumpy voice. Due to her gaze toward him, it was difficult for him to object.

“Oh my, Ellen is quite jealous. This is the first time I have seen this side of you.”

Ellen made a completely sulky face upon hearing Sophie's words as she teased her.

“Jealous? Of course not. He was looking at you in a rude manner. Even you can't feel good about that.”

Placing an index finger to her mouth, Sophie continued to speak gently.

“True, he did see everything.”

Lim, who had remained silent until then, drank some wine. Teita wiped some she spilled in a panic. Ellen's face was hard to comment on at all. Tigre simply bowed his head deeply.

“There is no need to worry so much. I was the one to stumble, after all. It was simply my first time sticking to a man---”

“... Sophia-sama. If possible, let us continue with the more serious business at hand.”

Interrupting Sophie's words, Lim clearly had an expression showing she was enduring a headache. Finally, Tigre and Ellen managed to pull their act together.

"Sophie. It seems you received word from the Royal Palace. I'm a bit anxious, since I assume you came to tell her she is not to interfere with Brune."

When Tigre spoke, Sophie lowered her eyes and looked at him.

"... That is correct. Though it will hurt to say, the talks did not conclude well."

"What do you mean?"

"The King of Brune, his majesty is currently ill, and he could not attend. Though we spoke to Prime Minister Bodwin, it seems the largest issue is your position."

"Position?"

Tigre tilted his head. Ellen was the one to react.

“I was employed by Tigre. This matter should be irrelevant to Zhcted Kingdom.”

“Officially that is true, but they said [The Vanadis is after our territory].”

Sophie laughed and Ellen shrugged with a bitter smile. They heard she had requested his territory for his ransom.

“After that, there was a message they wished to convey to Lord Tigrevurmud.”

Without missing a beat, Sophie spoke her words accurately.

[In face of the sin of rebellion, Vorn has been deprived of all rights as a citizen of Brune, his title, and his family name. Alsace will be run directly by the King. Once the turmoil has settled, a magistrate will be sent from the King's Capital.]

“... Rebellion.”

Bringing his hand to his forehead, Tigre spoke that word deeply.

Though he imagined it to be so, his heart felt heavy knowing it was true; still, he was relieved the people under his charge had not been accused.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. A messenger from the Royal Palace will come one day. Other than myself, have you not heard from Lord Massas?”

“Huh?”

Tigre involuntarily uttered a sound. Lim and Teita looked to Sophie in wonder.

“You know Lord Massas name. No, may I ask how you know of him?”

“Oh my, he did not tell you.”

Sophie looked on with a smile.

“I became acquainted with him in the King's Capital of Nice. He told me he would take his troops to Lord Tigrevurmud once he returned to his lands. Though I was thinking of coming to meet Ellen with him, I decided to come early since we were close. He should arrive tomorrow afternoon.”

After dinner and the conference was finished, Tigre sat while maintaining his bow.

Sophie had left after telling Batran, who was now sitting at Tigre's side, that Massas was safe.

Ignoring the difference of status between nobleman and villager, both Batran and Massas had known each other from before Tigre was even born. Hearing of Massas' safety, the little old man was more happy than Tigre.

Once he finished his maintenance, Tigre noticed a gaze as he stood up.

“Did you need something, Young Lord?”

“No, there is nothing. I wish to get a bit of fresh air. You won't be going since it's this cold, will you?”

Tigre stopped the elderly man from standing with a joke.

“You should return at once. It won't do to have the General catching a cold.”

“... I'll keep that in mind.”

Tigre left the tent after waving his hand to Batran. Similarly, he waved to the soldiers on watch and began walking without any particular purpose.

His feet took him to a secluded area. The cold winter air and the light of the stars bathed down on Tigre. Massas was safe.

It was good news, but after walking this far, Tigre still could not feel truly happy.

“A traitor, am I...”

He murmured the words. When it came out in his voice, he felt his body tremble from the very core.

It was deemed he had taken arms against the Kingdom of Brune. No, it was not just himself but all the people who followed him.

--- I can't lose now...!

He clenched his teeth and grasped his fist tightly. The Thenardier Army had burned and devastated the town of his birth and attacked the people he cherished. Though he had forced this unreasonable task upon them as their charge, they had followed him and supported each other.

He was doing this to protect them. He could not be negative.

He stared into the darkness, confirming his own determination.

"--- Who is it~?"

Suddenly, something covered his eyes as soon as the warm and calm voice hit his ears. Something soft hit Tigre's back, upon which he pulled away on reflex.

A sweet smell peculiar to a woman's skin stimulated his nose, and her light voice touched his ear.

"So, Sophie...?"

Though they had only met today and had barely spoken to one another, her pleasant and relaxed voice sounding in his ear was immediately identifiable.

After she removed her hands from Tigre's face and separated from him, he turned around to see her smile gently. Sophia Obertas stood before him with golden bishop staff in hand.

“Was it really that easy?”

“You may say that, but there are only four women here, and ignoring all else, your voice is quite beautiful...”

While he answered, Tigre could not help but be wary of the Vanadis in the back of his mind.

He felt no signs. She wore a dress, but there were no sounds of it rustling.

Regardless of battle, she, too, was a Vanadis.

“Oh my, such flattery.”

Sophie gently pat Tigre's head with a smile. Though he often did it to Teita, Tigre felt embarrassed to have it done to himself.

Still, the feeling of her palm and the kindness and warmth in it felt good. Sophie did not stop with just one or two strokes, though. She continued even beyond thirty. As expected of her.

“Why are you here?”

“I wished to talk with you for a bit.”

Sophie obediently answered his question. She had seen Tigre leave his tent and secretly followed after him.

“It will not do if the General goes out alone.”

Rather than scolding him, she spoke with a tone as if she were admonishing a child. Tigre thought to pull away, but Sophie did not notice. She continued to pat Tigre's hair as he looked at her in awkward embarrassment.

“So... What did you wish to speak with me about?”

The sound of her bishop staff rang through the air as she looked up at the starry sky.

“... What is Ellen to you?”

What are you saying so suddenly? Tigre wanted to say that, but he swallowed his words. Sophie looked away from the sky and gazed straight at Tigre in earnest; her smile had disappeared. Her beryl eyes displayed a strong will; she exuded an atmosphere that would allow no deception.

No, Tigre released his tension immediately. There's no need to think about it. I only need to answer frankly.

“For me, Ellen is my benefactor... and if I may be so impudent as to say it, my comrade-in-arms.”

“A comrade-in-arms?”

Sophie's bright eyes stared at him. Her bishop staff shook and glittered gold, as if scattering the darkness. Tigre nodded thinking it a natural reaction.

If he had asked a person of Zhcted, they would consider Tigre as Ellen's prisoner of war. To call the Vanadis a comrade would be nothing more than insolence.

However, he fought alongside Ellen.

He also used an abnormal power.

“Do you dislike Ellen?”

“Dislike?”

Tigre was bewildered hearing a question he had not expected. Sophie continued to speak.

“You are Ellen's prisoner.”

“Ellen lent me her soldiers.”

After giving a prompt answer, Tigre shrugged his shoulders, mischief bleeding from his eyes.

“Ellen calls me Tigre. I call her Ellen. I'm not particularly in the habit of calling people I dislike by their nicknames.”

When Sophie heard Tigre's words, she smiled brightly. It was a smile lit by the light from her bishop staff – a smile attractive enough to fall in love with.

“It seems you really feel that way. I am relieved.”

“How do you know?”

“I cannot say I know. I simply believe. I saw your face; I heard your words. “

Tigre thought she said it like a prayer a Shinto priest or shrine maiden might say. She had clearly seen through him and began to laugh.

“I have seen how Ellen and Lim view you. I have heard how your maid and the soldiers speak of you. Lord Massas Rodant has also told me of you... There was much for me to go on, but, in the end, your facial expressions, your voice, your behavior, those are what allow me to place my faith in you. You truly cherish Ellen.”

Without a sound, her golden hair and green dress fluttered as she walked before Tigre.

“You have become the center of attention even in Zhcted. Why has Ellen associated so much with you, who on earth is this Tigrevurmud Vorn, and so on.”

Her smile disappeared. At a distance of fewer than three steps from Tigre, Sophie stopped walking. It was a suitable distance for her bishop staff.

“The most common rumor is that Ellen fell in love with you at a glance. That, too, is not impossible. The soldiers have never moved for an Earl of a neighboring country and thrust their neck into a civil war. You also fought Mira. How could it not be a large thing? That would normally be impossible.”

Tigre involuntarily turned his gaze to the black bow in his hands. Tigre did not understand the amazing power held in this bow. Still, there was something else that came from Tigre's mouth.

“Your actions when you were bathing, were you testing me?”

“I only tripped then.”

Tigre sincerely thought the woman who smiled with her head inclined was testing him, but it seems he was wrong.

“Still, that is not quite right. You said earlier Ellen was a comrade-in-arms, but those near to you do not necessarily see that. Half see you two as comrades, half see you as more of a pet.”

Is it better to be a prisoner of war or a pet? At the moment, Tigre was more anxious about another issue.

“If we had fallen in love... Would you have stopped Ellen?”

Sophie nodded slowly.

“That is correct. Whether it be as Vanadis or not, I think of Ellen as an important friend. Still, it is a big issue. As an aristocrat, even amongst your friends, do you not separate personal and private affairs?”

The Vanadis Ludmira appeared in Tigre's mind upon hearing her explanation. Their territories bordered one another and she was on bad relations with Ellen.

Even Tigre did not have the greatest of relations with some of the aristocracy in territories neighboring Alsace, but there was no conflict out of mutual interest.

“Ellen must not do anything rash based on her emotions. If necessary, I would have brought her back by force. I would have done the same should I have deemed you to have bound your fate too strongly to Ellen, since that could also be a problem.”

The rings of the bishop staff made a cold sound as it was thrust before Tigre, but it was pulled back immediately. Sophie bowed before Tigre, her hands behind her back.

“But for now, I will place my faith in you. I leave Ellen in your care.”

“I understand.”

Tigre nodded strongly in reassurance.

“Though I said it a while ago, Ellen is my benefactor, my comrade-in-arms. I will absolutely defend her.”

Ellen was far more skillful in horsemanship and swordsmanship, and she had the Silver Flash Arifal. It

may have been presumptuous to say he would protect her.

Even so, they were Tigre's true thoughts. He was saved by the kindness of her and the people of her territory. Even if they fought each other as enemies, his days spent with her since they met in Dinant only solidified his determination.

“Thank you.”

Though simple, Sophie's words held much emotion.

After the two returned to the tent, Tigre immediately went to sleep having dispelled his hesitation. Sophie, however, did not.

She covered her body in a blanket and calmly sat outside, waiting for time to pass.

The night grew cold, and many of the soldiers were asleep. Sophie and Ellen slipped out of the women's tent. Away from the soldiers' eyes, the two walked quickly, considering the risk should they be heard.

"I did not think I would meet you in a place like this."

Though there was neither moon nor stars in the sky, Sophie's Light Flower radiated a golden light. The cold night air was inhibited by the Silver Flash at Ellen's waist

.

"Same here. If it were not for my meeting with Lord Massas, I would have returned to Zhcted this evening."

"Why did you come? Though you came to see me, it doesn't exactly mean you're not under suspicion."

Ellen looked doubtful. If she thought of Sophie's position as a messenger of Zhcted, it was far too dangerous to meet Ellen today.

"There are a few reasons. I wished to speak to Lord Tigrevurmud whom you so fondly speak of having love affairs with. I was also worried about you and wondered if you had prepared a means of escape."

“I don't remember talking about love affairs with Tigre.”

Ellen replied with a sharp answer. Sophie smiled in amusement and giggled. She held Ellen closely and stroked her silver-white hair.

“He really is cute. He resembles Lunie-chan a little.”

“... You never praise people.”

Ellen shook off Sophie's arms and looked at her. Her shoulders were shaking in laughter.

When Sophie looked up, she held a serious expression. The future conversation was the specific reason she left the camp.

“Elizavetta seems to have deep ties to both Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier.”

Ellen's bright red eyes shined strongly. Elizavetta was yet another Vanadis. Ellen strongly disliked her and evaluated her poorly.

“I cannot tell you much about Valentina, but her territory is the furthest from Brune, so I do not believe

she has an intimate association with them. Olga is missing.”

“Missing?”

“She left on a journey with her ^{Viralt} Dragonic Tool and left only a letter behind.”

Ellen stood with her mouth half open, unable to say anything for a while.

Valentina and Olga were both Vanadis; however, Ellen had only met them once or twice and was not familiar with their personalities.

“... Has the Dragonic Tool abandoned Olga?”

Sophie simply shrugged her shoulders, as it seemed like it was possible to have happened.

“There is no telling what a Dragonic Tool thinks. There is that issue with Sasha as well...”

Sophie shook her head, her golden hair waving, as Ellen frowned.

“Any news on Sasha?”

“There have been no changes... though that is only from when I last left Zhcted.”

Ellen's eyes sank. Sasha – Alexandra – was also a Vanadis, and she was someone who could be called Ellen's partner and best friend. She had an illness that affected her body, even before the two met. Even with that, Ellen had not yet defeated Sasha with the sword.

“Sasha would not wish for you to worry about her. It is true she cannot be cured, but I doubt she would want you to stop for that.”

Sophie spoke to Ellen with care. Realizing this, Ellen bowed her head in assent.

“For the time being, you need to keep your thoughts on Elizavetta.”

Elizavetta's territory was far from LeitMeritz which Ellen governed. Though it was unlikely problems would occur like they had with Ludmira, it was best to take precaution.

“Also, I apologize. Regarding the Dragons used by Duke Thenardier, I have not yet found anything.”

“There's no need to find out immediately. Do as you see fit.”

“Thank you. I am glad I came here nonetheless. I was able to see that man you have such interest in.”

Sophie slouched a little as she laughed. Her bishop staff swayed as its golden light spilled from the tip.

“Like I told you, with his upbringing, it would be disgraceful---”

“Yet you still spend so much time together?”

Rather than it being a slip of the tongue, it felt like she was stopped while she had taken a deep breath. Ellen began to speak to deny her accusations as she turned her head away, but she could find no words to say; she was hesitant to deny it. So she changed the topic.

“... So what did you think of Tigre when you met him?”

“He is such a lovely child. Though serious, he is honest.”

I already knew that, Ellen muttered in her mind.

--- It can't be helped. They met only half a day ago... No, perhaps she heard stories of him before she came here.

Incidentally, it had been about a half koku since Sophie and Tigre spoke.

"Ah, but..."

Sophie began to speak more.

"Though he has a solid appearance, I cannot find anything particularly noteworthy in him. I do not understand why you choose to help him, so I am a bit curious."

"I haven't heard those words in a while."

Though the golden haired Vanadis expressed interest in everything out of curiosity, she rarely spoke of it. When she purposely said it, it meant she had a considerably strong degree of interest. The last time Ellen heard those words was when she spoke about Lunie.

"I'll tell you now, though. That guy is mine."

"It really is love, after all."

“... We have a contract.”

“If it is simply a contract, then you should not mind lending him to me for a bit. I will make sure to return him; of course, he will be washed properly if I get him a little dirty.”

Thinking about her nature, Ellen looked at Sophie in amazement.

“Don't approach Tigre while you're here. It's too dangerous.”

She spoke those joking words seriously while the two spoke of him as if he were an object to be used.

Tigre was able to invite the next morning in a calm manner, the first time in a long while.

Based on their victory over Marquis Greast and Sophie's words, Massas would appear today.

--- I'm worried about leading the soldiers. The audience did not go well. If that's the case, what will I do next...

The King knew of the situation, and, currently, all roads other than war had disappeared. Still, it was good that Massas was safe.

He was a close friend to his late father and a reliable adviser who took care of him in a variety of ways. His role could not be replaced by Teita, Batran, Ellen, or Lim.

He changed his clothes and left the tent to wash his face.

“... What?”

Though the early morning air of the camp was filled with silence, the atmosphere still felt noisy. As he approached Ellen's tent, he saw Batran run from a distance. Having found Tigre, Batran relaxed his tense, wrinkle-filled face. He ran to Tigre, out of breath, then inhaled deeply before speaking.

“Young Lord, the enemy is stationed to the west, approximately fifteen or sixteen belsta away.”

“The enemy?”

His peaceful morning had been disturbed early.

The soldiers, after having a quick breakfast, hastily vacated the camp. Inside Tigre's tent were four people – Tigre, Ellen, Lim, and Augre. Ellen thought to call Sophie but hesitated. After all, she was still an outsider.

“They're different. They're the Navarre Army...”

Viscount Augre confirmed the scout's report and had a grim expression.

“I wish to confirm this. How are the Knighthoods of Brune different from the soldiers?”

Seeing Augre's tense countenance, Ellen tilted her head in doubt.

“The Knights of Brune have undergone a trial.”

After wetting his throat with wine, Augre continued his explanation.

“The Knights are well versed in the military arts and culture. Their military arts are focused on the art of the sword, spear, and equestrian skills; their culture is based on the spirit of Knighthood, reading and writing, strategy, and heraldry. Once a year, they undergo a trial to measure these abilities in the King's Capital, and those who pass this trial may become a Knight.”

After taking a deep breath, Augre's expression became even more deep.

“The Navarre Knights that approach us now are lead by Roland, the [Black Knight] said to be the strongest in Brune.”

Tigre reacted for the first time. He understood Augre's attitude.

“I have heard of Roland as well.”

A sound of admiration leaked from Ellen's mouth. Her bright red eyes shined with interest.

“Even Tigre has heard of him in his rural town. His strength sounds interesting.”

“Roland took the trial and became a Knight at the age of 13. Though his skill in culture was appropriate for his age, his military skills far surpassed expectations. Though there were many others who aspired to Knighthood, all of whom had considerable influence, Roland confronted them all and took victory.”

A 13 year old boy who defeated many experienced Knights. This elicited a bitter reaction from both Ellen and Lim.

“That seems a bit too much to believe...”

“It is a fact.”

Augre's tone made it impossible not to believe.

“After reaching the peak, Roland had yet to lose. He emerged victorious from the Kingdom sponsored games for three consecutive years, and he always defeated the enemy when he came out on the battlefield. His Majesty was quite pleased with him and appointed him leader of the Navarre Knights. The same year, he gave him the Kingdom's sacred blade, Durandal.”

At this point, Augre frowned, his body was visibly shaking.

“The Knights of Navarre have their fortress established along the most important place on the Western Border where Brune meets Sachstein and Asvarre.”

“The border disputes have never ended there?”

Augre nodded gravely to Lim's doubtfully asked question.

“He is no stranger to skirmishes with forces exceeding ten thousand in number, so all his soldiers are accustomed to war. Roland has led the Knights of Navarre through these battles for many years.”

“... I see.”

At last, Ellen looked serious. In a place where one devotes his time to fight every day, the leader could not be a halfway capable individual.

“But why are they here?”

Tigre raised a question.

“The Knights of the Kingdom swear allegiance to His Majesty. They swear upon their honor before the Gods and fundamentally accept commands only from the King ...”

“It is difficult to believe His Majesty gave this order. Most likely either Dukes Thenardier or Ganelon managed to mobilize him in some way.”

“It does not matter. Make preparations to fight against those that come to us. We cannot solve this only with vigilance.”

Ellen spoke. Augre bowed deeply in gratitude.

A messenger was sent out for negotiation but came back dejected after only a half koku.

“Their answer was [We will not exchange words with the enemy. We will only accept surrender], and [If you wish to surrender, throw away all your arms].”

“So we must surrender if we wish to talk.”

“That's a new one.”

Ellen was impressed with the enemy General's blunt attitude. Her bright red pupils were filled with the urge to fight. A smile floated to her mouth, and the air in the surroundings stirred, as if the longsword Arifal was reacting to her will.

On the other side, Tigre, Augre, and Lim wore expressions as if they had headaches. They looked at each other; it was not the time for this kind of talk.

“Send a messenger from me.”

Tigre chose two people from Alsace from amongst his soldiers and had them go to the Knights. If they could not enter a negotiation still, they would at least be able to form a consensus. To this end, they were buying time for Massas to arrive.

However, the results did not change. They were pushed away without receiving a single word.

“They didn't even listen to us.”

They solemnly reported to Tigre. The four briefly conferred and finished their meeting.

Ellen and Lim left the tent to gather the Zhcted Army. At that point, Augre's son, Gerard, entered.

“Are you well, Earl Vorn, Father?”

After the Viscount nodded, several men appeared with Gerard; they were Brune aristocrats who were cooperating with Viscount Augre.

“Earl Vorn, will you please explain the situation.”

What seemed the most senior of the men advanced. He appeared to be in his mid forties, his large body was wrapped in hempen clothes and a fur mantle. He, too, was a Viscount, just like Augre.

“Our enemies were Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon. Why is it that the Knights of the Sword has come to us?”

Tigre was hesitant to say he was branded a rebel; however, before Tigre opened his mouth, Viscount Augre laughed and answered.

“It seems they saw the Zhcted Army and believe we are leading a rebellion. It appears they will not listen to us lest we surrender.”

The men were shaken.

“Then it is necessary that we throw aside our arms to speak. The Knights of Navarre are led by Roland. We have no chance of victory.”

“They are Knights. They are different from Duke Thenardier; surely they would understand should you say you are protecting yourself. If we surrender our weapons, they will listen to us. Surely they will understand our position should we explain Sir Thenardier's cruelty.”

One person spoke, probably following the momentum of the conversation.

“How do you propose we do this? Do you believe the Zhcted Army will throw aside their weapons?”

Tigre asked them with an indifferent voice as he spoke

“No matter who we may cooperate with, it will be the blood of Brune that flows.”

Tigre read their minds.

--- First the Zhcted Army... Now they wish to rely on the Knights of Navarre.

He did not know what they thought. Though the Zhcted Army was helping Tigre and Augre to defend their territories, it was not so for them. They were defending themselves from Duke Thenardier and were looking for people they could trust to defend them.

“If you wish, please leave the battlefield. You may cross the river to the north or through the forest to the south. I do not care. You may discard your weapons there and speak to the Navarre Knights. However...”

Tigre continued with a stronger tone.

“I do not believe the Navarre Knights will protect you from Duke Thenardier. If I were to surrender, then the Zhcted Army would simply return to their lands and the Navarre Knighthood would return to the west to defend the borders of Brune.”

“No, to say that...”

Tigre took a step toward the man who wished to say something.

“The cruelty of Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon did not start yesterday. The Knights appeared today. Has anyone in Brune denounced them?”

“That's... But the Knights only move by His Majesty's command...”

“Honestly, this is exactly why we are placing our faith in the Zhcted Army.”

Hearing the man speak, Augre stepped in to calm the situation down. Tigre was aware he was losing his patience and stepped back to allow Augre to take his place.

“Your fear of fighting the Navarre Knighthood is justified; however, I can only think this is a result of Duke Thenardier's plans. By using them, he can manipulate how the Zhcted Army moves. Really, Thenardier is a troublesome opponent.”

Tigre and Augre were not speaking in a particularly nasty manner, they were simply stating facts. The men turned pale, unable to counter them.

In a half koku, the Silver Meteor Army finished lining up in the center of the Orange Plains.

For the time being, there were no signs of backing down.

Sword of Invincibility

That afternoon, the Silver Meteor Army and the Knights of Navarre confronted each other at five hundred alsin (approximately five hundred meters).

As if following the gray clouds from the day before, an unspeakable sensation of anxiety ran through the soldiers. Between the armies, slight rays of sunlight passed through small gaps in the cloud cover.

“It looks like they wish to fight.”

While watching the enemy line up in waves, Roland muttered to himself. Though there were different colors amongst the army due to the two nobles involved, the predominant color followed the Black ^{Zirnitra} Dragon Flag.

“So they're lining up there.”

Vice-Commander Olivier received a report. The Knights from Brune Kingdom fought using more than one formation. The one they took up now was called the [Spear] and it was one shaped in a triangle, much like a spear's tip.

“Think yourself a spear, you and your steed are creatures of iron. Run quickly, pierce deeply, and crush the enemy.”

Roland would take the lead. Normally the leader took the rear, but the man took the role himself so he could penetrate the enemy camp first. He had always done so.

“I wonder if we should fight now. Perhaps we should wait until the information gathering is complete?”

Before coming here, Roland sent a messenger to the surroundings. His goal was to receive information on the geography and the number of troops available. Based on the circumstances, he would request reinforcements.

He had sent Tigre's messenger away because he did not want to be misled by extraneous information. His sin was more than obvious, since he was with soldiers of Zhcted.

“The sun will work against us. We have one koku at most; we can't waste any time.”

Olivier shrugged his shoulders as he heard the Black Knight. Roland's decision was correct. It was the job of the Knights to follow his directions.

He pulled out the sacred sword Durandal from his waist and held it to the sky.

“Gods of the land, watch us from the skies of Brune. Perkunas, King of all Gods, Trigraf, God of War, Radegast, God of Honor, all Gods, bear witness to our righteous battle!”

Hearing his shout, the Knights began chanting. Roland lowered the tip of his sword toward the enemy and inhaled deeply.

“Follow my blade!”

Five thousand horse-bound Knights kicked off the ground in unison. The earth felt as though it would collapse from the thunderous roar.

The members of the Silver Meteor Army consisted of one thousand Brune soldiers following Tigre and Augre

with the Zhcted Army numbering four thousand directly behind them. The remaining forces were positioned behind them.

The Brune soldiers, though few in number, stood at the front, both here and with their battle of Greast. Though few in number, the Zhcted Army were their allies in the end.

However, seeing the Knights rush toward them, shouting for battle, caused them visible unrest.

The Brune soldiers clashed with the Navarre cavalry.

The Navarre Knights' destructive power exceeded the wall of Brune soldiers. The sight which developed surprised Ellen, Tigre, and Lim.

The man who led the spearhead, Roland with his sword in hand, was not stopped by anyone.

He killed all who abandoned sword and spear to run away, he cut through shields, and he crushed all who stood in his way using overwhelming force.

The horse Roland rode let out a violent neigh, as if reflecting its rider's mind. Its mane was disheveled as it

crushed the ground and stepped upon corpses. It simply charged forward.

As if they had heard their leader's thoughts, the Knights fought off the Brune soldiers and thrust through them, following Roland's power in waves of rage.

--- He's strong. He's too fast, too.

Ellen and Lim did not have a lack in plans; they had thought of a number of countermeasures, but they had no room to fully develop them all. Though, despite their young age, they had large amounts of experience in war, but it was their first time seeing such power and speed.

“--- Lim. I leave command to you.”

Without waiting for her unsociable aide to speak, Ellen kicked the stomach of her horse and jumped out, making her way through the soldiers as she pulled out the longsword at her waist. She ran to Roland nonstop like a savage beast.

Seeing him close at hand, Ellen instinctively took a deep breath. Roland stood there, large enough to be a

giant. He was the only one in black armor which doubled , tripled the size of his frame. His very presence overwhelmed all else.

An unprecedented chill ran down the back of the Vanadis of the Silver Flash.

They were within attacking distance.

It was as if a light exploded between them. Their clash made those in the surroundings flinch. Ellen's beautiful face was dyed in astonishment.

--- *My Veda...*

They had struck each other once, yet Ellen's right arm had become numb. She could only pray her arm would not be blown away.

Ellen's horse staggered; it was exhausted, falling back step by step, regardless of the instructions of its rider.

--- *Arifal did no damage...*

Their swords could easily cleave a soldier; this was unusual

“--- It's been a long time since someone has received my sword.”

The Black Knight finally stopped moving as he looked at Ellen without hiding his surprise.

“Neither in Sachstein nor in Asvarre. You are no hero or Knight of this country. How could a delicate girl like you...”

Roland brandished his sword before her. Ellen released her hands from the reins and clutched her longsword with both hands. Again, an intense clash occurred, but it was not just once. Many attacks in quick succession occurred, tearing through the air. Sparks scattered with every meeting of their weapons, the soldiers held their breath.

Ellen clenched her teeth. The man of black had both power and technique. Furthermore, he wielded his large sword as if he were sweeping a spear, despite its massive weight.

Though he could cut through the earth, Ellen managed to somehow hold her ground. With every blow Roland gave, she struck a blow in turn.

One slice flew through the neck of Ellen's horse. Without slowing down, it approached her. Ellen immediately removed her feet and jumped away to the ground to ward off his attack. The headless horse fell to the earth.

Unexpectedly, the Silver Flash in her hand let off a dull blue light for a moment, and a faint wind blew over its owner.

“Arifal...?”

Arifal's intent was transmitted with the wind. It was telling her to [Be Wary of that Sword]. Though Ellen was confused, she recovered immediately.

Her Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool never lied to her.

Ellen looked up at the Black Knight and carefully took her distance.

“That blade... What is it made of?”

“That's a strange thing to worry about in the middle of a fight... isn't it?”

Roland gazed sharply at Arifal.

“That is the first sword which has not broken with a succession of attacks from Durandal. What exactly is your blade made of?”

“I don't know. I inherited it from someone whose face I don't know.”

Ellen answered honestly. Though Roland's face was incredulous, he did not pursue any further.

“I also do not know what this blade is made of. I received this blade from His Majesty to defend the land of Brune. That is enough for me.”

--- Not good, that blade is the same.

Ellen spoke bitterly in her mind. Roland's Herculean strength which could cleave through the enemy's armor was demonstrated in full with his sword. An ordinary weapon would simply shatter.

“Vanadis-sama!”

To protect Ellen, ten of Zhcted's cavalry rushed Roland , with their spears.

“Idiots, Stop!”

Along with Ellen's shout, Roland's sword cleaved through them all at once. The soldiers of Zhcted were torn like blades of grass, their flesh, blood, and bones scattered about the ground. Not a single spear reached Roland.

Is this man human?

His overwhelming strength brought this doubt to her mind. It was like watching a nightmare.



--- My ^{Veda} Dragonic Skill...

It was the last resort and the strongest attack of the Vanadis. The thought grazed the corner of her mind.

However, the other person was human, even if his weapon was abnormal.

“So you're the noble Vanadis, the Commander of Zhcted?”

When he asked those words, Ellen noticed he had not declared his name. Her red eyes looked strongly at Roland.

“Eleanora Viltaria. I am one of the seven Vanadis.”

“I am Roland, Knight of Navarre. Vanadis---”

Roland looked down with a will to fight in his black pupils.

“Though I do not know your reasons, I cannot allow you to set a single foot in His Majesty's land of Brune.”

Ellen looked in his eyes. Roland ignored her gaze and lifted his sword... But his movements stopped.

The soldiers of Zhcted had divided, a man with dull red hair and black bow in hand rode in on a horse as he nocked his arrow.

“Tigre...!”

Ellen involuntarily called out his name. Tigre stared harshly at Roland, completely unaffected by the raging battle beside him. He remained still like a statue.

“Bow...?”

Roland frowned as he stared at Tigre. He aimed his sword toward Tigre's neck as he ran by on his horse.

Tigre drew his bowstring to its limit, though he did not release it. The two men's distance narrowed. Immediately before entering the sword's range, Tigre bent his body, almost horizontally, as he hung off the horse.

Roland's swing shook the wind; the response was shallow.

At that time, Tigre shot his arrow, but with his unreasonable posture, it flew toward the sky, directly above Roland.

The two ran about on horseback. As Tigre approached Ellen, he reached his arm out. Ellen jumped lightly on the horse after grabbing his hand.

On the other hand, Roland, who had kept a fixed distance from Tigre, began to follow him more closely.

--- I won't let you escape.

If it was a horse with two people on it, he would easily catch up.

At that time, the sound of the wind being cut ran by the Black Knight's ears. Before he was aware of it, an arrow was driven deep into the head of Roland's horse.

“... What?”

The arrow drove through the horse's jaw. The horse's legs folded as it collapsed. Roland's face was dyed in astonishment.

The arrow Tigre shot was aimed toward the sky. It drew an arc and fell, depriving Roland of his mobility.

With him standing on the ground, the cavalry of Zhcted rushed Roland thinking he was vulnerable, their spears coming from many directions. The dark haired Knight should have been skewered, but he jumped up and, like an argent whirlwind, cleaved both men and horse together.

Roland stood like a large tree, taking root in his place as he twirled his sword. The surroundings were filled with blood and screams. His black armor was dyed red.

Many Knights of Navarre followed Tigre and Ellen on horseback, but they could not catch up.

Tigre had turned around and fired arrows in quick succession. With the sound of the arrows and the bowstring being pulled back, he had shot multiple arrows at a time, all of them successfully hitting their target.

He had pierced their face and belly. Knights, one after another, fell down as their horses collapsed. Some of them were directly hit by arrows, flipping about as they fell off their steed.

“You saved me, Tigre. You're amazing as usual.”

Ellen tried to smile at Tigre but stopped speaking as her eyes were dyed in red.

From his left shoulder to his right flank, Tigre had a large, straight wound. His black leather armor and clothes were dyed red, his skin wet with sweat, his face pallid, his breathing rough.

Although it seemed like Tigre had dodged Durandal when he and Roland crossed paths, he had not been able to avoid it completely. Firing his bow toward the Knights only served to open it further.

“Tigre!”

Tigre's body began to fall. Ellen stretched her hands out and gripped the reins from behind him as she supported him with her right hand which held her Silver Flash. Her arm was dyed red immediately.

The soldiers of Zhcted were pushed aside. The Knights of Navarre held up heavy shields to block the rain of arrows, accepted the challenge of all who took sword or spear to them, or rushed forward and pushed them aside .

They followed closely after Ellen and Tigre. Realizing they had pulled out javelins, Tigre nocked another arrow , yet he did not have the strength to draw his bowstring.

Ellen clenched her teeth. If she took her blade, Tigre would lose his support and would surely fall from the horse.

To make matters worse, the horse's legs broke and it fell forward. The two were thrown to the ground. Though Ellen endured the pain and pulled her body up immediately, Tigre, who had not released his bow, could not stand.

“Tigre...!”

Ellen ran to Tigre and lifted him in her arms. A dozen javelins were thrown at them all at once.

“--- Brilliant Waves, ^{Falvarna} Gather Before Me.”

A voice called out between Ellen and the javelins.

Her golden hair symbolized her gentle nature; her beryl eyes expressed her dignity. She stood before them in a pale green dress, unsuitable to the battlefield. Not a fragment of her smile existed on her face.

Sophia Obertas stood there, as if to protect Ellen and the others.

A golden light fell from the tip of her Light Flower and turned lightly in her hand. Without melting into the air, it flowed through the space before Sophie, drawing a perfect circle.

The circle of light glittered, releasing a silver-white spiral. The spiral formed a broad barrier, surrounding a golden ring inside. The wall of transparent light completely encompassed Sophie.

The spears thrown by the Knights of Navarre hit the wall of light and fell to the ground. The Knights opened their eyes widely and let out a sound of astonishment.

A curtain of mysterious light appeared when the woman in a dress showed up. The event was beyond their understanding.

“Ellen. Hurry.”

She looked back at the silver-white haired Vanadis. Her beryl eyes prompted her to move to a horse standing nearby. Ellen managed to stand up while supporting Tigre, placing the bloody man on the horse before mounting it herself.

“Say your thanks later.”

“Yes. We'll meet again.”

After they exchanged a quick word, the Knights of Navarre promptly recovered and took up their swords. They charged; however, their horses stopped as if they had run into an invisible wall.

The Knights flinched. Though they may have been able to chase after Ellen if they avoided Sophie's wall of light, no one could make such a calm judgment.

A large number of Knights were held back by a single woman.

“... Oh?”

From behind, a low voice called out. It was a voice of salvation for the Knights.

Roland lowered his large sword and had finally caught up on a new horse.

“Woman, dressed like that, your clothes are hardly suitable for a place of war, isn't it? What's more... What is this wall of light?”

“I wonder. What will you do?”

A shiver ran through Sophie's body. In her hands, the Light Flower warned her with a small glow of golden light from the tip of her bishop staff. It warned her of danger, just like Ellen's Silver Flash.

The jet black Knight did not flinch even after seeing the wall of light.

“... It would take only a single swipe to sever this enchantment.”

With his sacred sword in hand, Roland continued tensing all the muscles in his body, its sound clearly audible.

“Though I don't know what manner of witchcraft or magic this is, it is nothing before Durandal.”

It was not a false show of power. The Black Knight spoke seriously. Sophie said “Oh my” out of habit, but there was no strength in her voice.

“Very well. I welcome you.”

The bishop staff glowed as Sophie smiled brilliantly.

Roland's horse kicked off the ground as he thrust straight toward the wall of light.

The moment Durandal hit the wall, the light became iridescent, the sound of shattering glass hit her eardrums. The circle of glittering gold stopped shining immediately. It was cut in two, and the particles of light dispersed through the air.



Though Sophie's eyes showed her surprise, her hands continued to manipulate her bishop staff.

Roland's swing tore through the domain of light Sophie had built. Sophie's bishop staff caught the heavy blow; she was forced to retreat by the frightening blade.

“--- Particles of Light, ^{Mirashem} Come to My Side.”

Roland rode forward to cut her down, but he pulled his hand aside as he saw countless grains of light engulf Sophie's body.

The lights were the size of a nail and began blinking before Sophie's body. Without a sound, both Sophie and the light disappeared.

“This is...?”

The Knights were astonished once again. They turned to their leader.

--- I can't see her, but... little by little, she's escaping.

Roland did not understand what Sophie had done, but he noticed she had run away.

--- It's troublesome, but it looks like she's another one of them.

After making that judgment, Roland looked at the soldiers surrounding him.

"Don't worry. It's just another enemy."

Hearing his words with no sign of a lack of will to fight, the Knights regained their energy. No matter what, they believed they would find no greater Knight on the continent, let alone in Brune.

When word of Tigre, the General, being injured spread, the Silver Meteor Army collapsed and was routed. They threw aside their arms and turned away. The Knights of Navarre swung their swords and thrust their spears without mercy.

The confusion only accelerated with the passage of time. It took all Ellen and Lim could do to prevent the army from collapsing. Though they had managed to pull the soldiers away, the soldiers of Brune led by Viscount Augre were small in number.

Though Roland took lead in the battle and chased after the enemy with his sacred sword, he stopped when he heard a sudden noise.

A Knight appeared without breath to give him a report

“A cavalry of three hundred has appeared behind our troops...”

The cavalry behind the Navarre Knights wielded sword and spear, catching the Knights, who felt they had won the battle, completely off guard.

--- *Was this their plan? No, it feels too late.*

Regardless, Roland was forced to end the chase and took measures to reorganize his troops. He looked up to the sky.

The gray clouds had broken, the darkness before the battle now gone. Roland felt like the darkness had followed the Silver Meteor Army, given the timing.

“We'll end here.”

--- *Summer... No, Autumn.*

Against the early sunset of an approaching winter, chasing the enemy any further would only serve to scatter his troops.

“No, this is unrelated to the season.”

Shaking his thick neck to the right and left, Roland reconsidered. If he were in a position where he did not need to worry about the King's Capital or the western borders, he may have continued pursuit.

Roland decided to place his trust in Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon who ordered him to battle.

The Knights of Navarre took orders only from the capital. They had received a royal command from the King's Capital. However, King Faron was ill and was unable to grant an audience to Roland.

The command was to kill Earl Vorn and the Zhcted Army. It was received from Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier. The written instructions were, without a doubt, written by the King, as it was marked with the royal seal. Roland had to simply follow his duties as a Knight.

“Lord Roland. His Majesty is pained by the Zhcted Army trampling about in the lands of Brune. Earl Vorn has invited them into our country.”

“We will send negotiators to Sachstein and Asvarre. We wish for you to wipe away Earl Vorn and the Zhcted Army as quickly as possible. We will buy you as much time as we can.”

--- I have heard their orders directly, and His Majesty is ill in bed. Though I do not wish to suspect them...

Still, soldiers can never move on their own. If he asked any more of Thenardier who had summoned him from the west, Roland would only feel he was being nosy.

--- Earl Vorn gave priority to rescuing the Vanadis of the Zhcted Army. It is doubtless now, they have a close relationship. Still---

Rather than the battle before him, Roland watched the movements of the allies who appeared to his rear from the King's Capital.

--- His Majesty's enemies are my enemy. Even if one person remains, I will cut them down with my blade.

Roland was an orphan. He was abandoned at the foot of the Ruberon Mountains near the royal capital Nice.

A shrine maiden working in the temple at the summit of the mountains found the pitiful baby as she made her way from the market at the foot of the castle walls.

She had lost her parents; her birthplace had collapsed. Rather than leaving the child, she decided to convince those of the temple to raise it.

Though he was raised surrounded by God, the boy grew up with an interest in the founder, King Charles, who revived Brune Kingdom.

The temple contained his coffin as well as many other relics.

Furthermore, Roland's body had a higher aptitude as a fighter than a priest. Though there was nothing noteworthy about his reading and writing, his body, compared to children of the same age, was strong, and he was good with anything that involved movement.

Though he was determined to become a Knight, there was one encounter he remembered.

On a certain day at a certain time, Faron, who was still Prince at the time, visited the temple for business. Roland did not know what the business was, he just remembered that Faron called out to the large boy.

The prince asked the boy his name. The boy said “Roland.” Faron smiled from ear to ear.

“Beside King Charles, there was a man named Roland. Though his origin as a warrior is unknown, he held the honor and supremacy to wield his sword in the defense of the King. He was a Knight amongst Knights.”

“A Knight amongst Knights...”

“Correct. Among the Knights today, there are many who believe in Roland. Many believe he came from this very temple.”

Roland was deeply moved. He had thought he was better suited to wielding a sword than praying to God. Furthermore, these were words from the Prince of a country. He felt so much joy that he wished to run about.

“I, I will become a Knight!”

In fact, Roland's name was not so rare in Brune, and Faron, who was learning to be King, could recite the name of all soldiers serving under King Charles from memory.

Though no one could call it a particularly miraculous coincidence, Roland did not know that. Even if he did, he was unlikely to worry.

The next day, Roland dedicated his life to becoming a Knight. He begged a Knight to teach him the sword, spear, and the art of horse riding.

It did not take him much time to surpass the other Knights.

He took the trial at the age of 13. He remembered the pleasure when he became a Knight. Though he was glad to become a Knight, Roland would hear Faron, who had just become King, speak at his conferment ceremony.

“To think that boy would grow up this much.”

Even if he had himself forgotten much of the meeting the next day, the King remembered him.

At this time, Roland had almost complete loyalty to Faron. Eight years later, he received the sacred sword of the Kingdom, Durandal. All Knights likened him to the warrior of legend, the [Knight of Knights].

That is why Roland fought. He fought for the King, fought for the Kingdom. He would not listen to the words of the enemy. It was not a problem until now. He was not supposed to have reached such an obstacle.

So long as he lived his life as a Knight, he would continue down this path.

Olivier appeared, having reorganized the ranks. Roland asked him a question.

“The one who shot my horse, the archer. His name was Tigre, was it?”

Olivier, who was in the immediate vicinity when Roland suppressed Ellen, had prepared a horse for Roland immediately. Sure enough, he had caught sight of Tigre.

“That man is Tigrevurmud Vorn. I saw him once long ago. He said he was good with a bow and was ridiculed as a person with no merit.”

Roland groaned. Olivier looked curiously at him from the side.

“Why do you worry? Though he shot at you, his arrow hit your horse by chance. It was simply bad luck for you..”

“Bad luck?”

Finally, Roland looked back at Olivier, the smile on his face exuding a strong will to fight.

“That's not right. It's different, Olivier. He did that on purpose.”

Olivier's face showed he did not understand. Roland explained while laughing merrily.

“If he shot me from the front, I would strike it down. That man made an accurate judgment.”

"If that is the case, then he was aiming at the horse rather than you."

"I knew it as soon as he was coming at me. He was aiming at my horse. What's more, he had the confidence to kill it with a single arrow."

If he killed the horse, it was possible to deprive Roland of his mobility. Above all, Tigre had aimed at him simply to help the silver-white haired Vanadis.

"It was a brilliant skill. It is the first time I have felt admiration for the bow."

"... If what you say is true, then Earl Vorn is a monster."
"

"I have also been called a monster by those of Sachstein and Asvarre." He cut down the enemy and their horses casually, as if it was nothing. He showed no sign of fatigue. He took command and simply moved on.

Towards his enemies, he was nothing but a monster.

"When I talk about you, I can only think I'm a mediocre Knight..."

Olivier sighed while the Black Knight laughed and told him not to worry.

About seven belsta from the battlefield (approximately seven kilometers), the Silver Meteor Army had barely reorganized their formation.

The soldiers lost numbered eight hundred, the number injured nearly double that. For an army six thousand strong, it was a crushing defeat.

Hearing the damage report, neither Ellen, Lim, nor Augre could speak.

The situation itself was distressing, but Tigre's injury only made it more serious. The young General was carried in on a stretcher and was tended to by Teita. He had yet to awaken.

The only good news was the appearance of reinforcements.

The three hundred cavalry had disrupted the Knights of Navarre who chased after them. They passed through the battlefield and joined the Silver Meteor Army.

A request for an audience came from the person leading them. Though Ellen was exhausted, she approved of the meeting at once.

Before long, an old Knight with a gray beard, his stocky body wrapped in armor, visited Ellen's tent and courteously bowed.

“I am Massas Rodant.”

“It has been a while, Lord Massas.”

Before Ellen could speak, Lim returned his bow and greeted him.

“You are Lord Massas? I have heard of you from Lim and Tigre.”

Ellen took the old Knight's hand with a smile and sincerely thanked him for his help. Massas began to frown.

“With all due respect, Lord Vanadis. Tigre... Earl Vorn, where might he be?”

Though he did not intend to look down on Ellen, Massas had come here for Tigre's sake. After a moment of hesitation, she reported that Tigre was injured.

“--- His condition?”

His short beard trembled as he spoke those words, an intense shock and sense of regret was clearly visible on his face. Incidentally, Massas had lived for more than five decades and had seen the death of many close acquaintances.

“It is a serious injury. He is still feverish, but it is not to the extent that he will die.”

Ellen's response did not conceal her overflowing sense of shame. Beside her, Lim's azure eyes were pensive as she maintained her silence like a statue.

Augre and Sophie appeared, blowing away the heavy atmosphere. Massas mood changed upon seeing their faces, glad by their reunion. Though fatigue was clearly in his face, his sense of defeat was considerably eased.

Though Augre and Sophie were worried about Tigre, they acted as calmly as usual, bringing a sense of calm to the surroundings.

“Massas. Though it may be abrupt, may we speak? How is it that you met the Vanadis of Zhcted in the King's Capital?”

“That's right. I would also like to hear this.”

Ellen agreed with Augre's words. Lim also nodded.

“What, I thought Miss Sophie would have told you.”

“I was unsure how to explain it, nor was I sure if I should say so.”

Sophie bowed gratefully to the old Knight.

“No, you were acting as a messenger. I don't mind.”

After the comment from Sophie, the three looked at Massas who stroked his beard, lost in thought.

“That's right... Where should I begin.”

It happened approximately twenty days before the defeat of the Silver Meteor Army.

It is said that, in the Kingdom of Brune, King Charles received the sacred blade Durandal at Ruberon.

King Charles traveled about many battlefields, wielding Durandal all the meanwhile. His victories revived many towns about Brune Kingdom.

Charles dedicated his gratitude to the Gods and established a shrine in the mountains of Ruberon, and he built his Royal Palace halfway up so he could meet with the spirits. The town at the foot of the mountain prospered; before long, the castle was moved down to the city.

And so, the Royal Capital of Nice was established. It acted as an important way point in Brune which connected the east and west sides of the continent.

All people passing from Zhcted or Muozinel to Sachstein or Asvarre, save for those with extenuating circumstances, would pass through the city.

With a river flowing from the top of the mountain through the city and the highway in the vicinity, many goods from various countries flooded through the city, bringing a heat and energy to the capital.

In the luxurious Royal Palace at the foot of the mountain, there was a garden where many flowers bloomed in the small hills, decorated by cleverly carved fountains.

It was a piece of artwork with a crystalline beauty, a garden nonexistent in either Zhcted or Muozinel. It was a symbol of Brune's prosperity.

Massas Rodant passed through the garden quickly.

There was a rampart surrounding the area, so ordinary citizens could not make it so far into the Royal Palace.

“Please inform His Majesty the King. Massas Rodant, in charge of the territory to the north, requests an audience.”

With a sonorous voice, he presented a medal indicating his title to the soldiers who defended the castle gate. After confirming his identity, the soldiers opened the castle gate.

His stocky body shook as he headed up the flight of steps. The second rampart entered his view. He showed his medal once again and entrusted his weapons to the guard as the gate was opened.

Having been exposed to the cold air of winter in the mountains, Massas was soaked in sweat. It was not from the fatigue of running up the stairs at a brisk pace but his tension.

The Palace was filled with white marble and decorated with gold. Many of the imperial guards wore a white mantle and walked about to defend the area.

Unlike an average soldier, they did not even flinch seeing an aristocrat; rather, they looked at Massas with a severe glance and spoke sternly.

--- *It's no different here.*

“My name is Massas Rodant; I am in charge of the lands of Aude granted to me by His Majesty. I have come to see Prime Minister Bodwin.”

He waited for some time. Though he remained quiet, he felt a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach.

Though he was an acquaintance of the Prime Minister, he had not scheduled a meeting. He was somewhat intimate with him since childhood, and it could serve as a way to have his audience more easily, but, should any sign of deception be found, he would be captured immediately and sent to prison without being given an opportunity to explain.

After the confirmation was complete, the Imperial Guard bowed to Massas.

“--- I apologize for having kept you waiting, Earl Rodant. Please pass.”

Massas stroked his gray beard as he passed through the doors to the royal palace.

After the aristocrat and Imperial Guards walked along the polished marble floor, the King's chambers finally came into view.

--- I doubt I will have an audience, nor did I receive a response. I will simply have to speak directly and have him listen to my words.

Massas had arrived at the Royal Capital more than ten days prior. Rather than recovering from the fatigue of travel, Massas moved aggressively and requested a meeting with the King the day he arrived.

However, Massas was forced to give up immediately. The Royal Palace affairs had been made private by Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon. He would not be able to meet the King any time soon.

“How is His Majesty?”

“After the battle in Dinant, he has been struck with sadness over Prince Regnas' death. It seems he has yet to recover.”

He walked about and visited his friends. Every person answered his question in that manner, though a few spoke even further.

“If you wish for a petition, it must be brought before Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier.”

He could not possibly do that. Both were enemies.

Massas was outraged. After thinking about it anxiously, he decided he would try to directly meet and speak to the King.

Before the King's private chambers, the Imperial Guards naturally stood. The room next to it was a private room where the Imperial Guards relaxed. Should anyone call, they could respond immediately.

While stroking his gray beard, Massas looked around at the guards and the passage.

--- It is impossible to go any further than this unless I am a powerful noble. No, his maid can also enter his chambers.

It was impossible to meet the King. Massas gently touched something enshrouded in his clothes. It was a letter to the King with information regarding the conduct of Duke Thenardier toward Tigre's lands written, including why he invited the Zhcted Army into his lands

.

--- Like I thought, I can do nothing but ask his maid or attendant.

The maid and attendant worked in the vicinity. Since they received a large salary, they could not be bribed with money, nor could Massas lie about his status to get in contact with their relatives.

However, Massas had information.

Though light, there was gossip about a scandal.

Those who wish to know of such talks could be found anywhere, including the deepest part of the Palace.

--- He was once absorbed in divination... Though there is no concrete evidence, it is something held in derision.

Massas was immersed in a bittersweet emotion when a voice called to him from the side.

“What business do you have with me, Earl Rodant?”

Turning around in surprise, he saw a man standing before him, wrapped in a gray uniform. He had a round

outline, but if one were to describe his features, they would say they were most akin to a cat. He also had a long gray beard and mustache.

“Bodwin...”

Massas groaned. He was the Prime Minister of Brune who assisted in the King's affairs. The cat-faced man was the pinnacle of all officials.

--- Did he find out already? It's too early...

Seeing the Imperial Guards glare at Massas who remained silent on the spot, Bodwin spoke with a quiet tone, though his eyes were sharp.

“Since there are others here, let us speak elsewhere.”

If he complained, the Imperial Guards might make a move. Letting out a sigh, Massas simply followed after Bodwin.

Massas and Bodwin had known each other before Bodwin became Prime Minister, and they remained on good terms, even with their change in position; however, he could not depend too strongly on that friendship given his rank.

Massas was led to one of the rooms used for official conferences. It was a small room without a window in which a large desk and chair were placed.

“Shall I serve you some wine?”

“So long as it is not grape vinegar.”

Massas had a bitter face as he responded to Bodwin. Grape wine which had fermented for too long became grape vinegar.

“Earl Rodant, you would not come to the Royal Palace to speak of past matters... For what reason did you come?”

“Alsace. Tigrevurmud Vorn.”

Massas responded promptly to Bodwin's straight forward question. Though it should have been clear with those two phrases, Bodwin looked at him calmly. He waited for more.

“Why did you ignore formal procedure? You did not even bother with a petition, nor did you apply for a meeting.”

“I arrived at the King's Capital more than ten days ago , and I have applied for an audience many times.”

Massas sat up straight and glared at Bodwin across the desk.

“How exactly it did not reach you, I do not know; however, this is likely an inconvenience for Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon. Should I still act in accordance to ceremony?”

“Given my position, I can only say you have no choice but to follow protocol.”

Bodwin was the Prime Minister. He assisted the King and aided with affairs of the state. Though he could understand Massas' position, he could not help but argue .

“How long will Alsace have to wait? It is winter now. When will the petition reach you? Spring? Alsace may very well fall before the snow melts. Even then, should I wait?”

Bodwin closed his eyes and withstood the words. He sat in his chair and waited for Massas to take a breath before opening his eyes.

“--- Massas. You must not speak of what you will hear needlessly.”

Bodwin called him Massas, rather than Earl Rodant.

--- He is not answering as Prime Minister.

After Massas consented with a nod, Bodwin stood up. The two left the room and walked down a corridor. They passed the King's private chambers and returned to the place where Massas met Bodwin. Massas could not help but be wary of what was happening.

“What is your intention?”

Bodwin did not answer, he simply continued to walk down the corridor in silence. Massas reluctantly followed after. The Imperial Guards allowed the two to pass in silence.

Before a set of double doors, Bodwin stopped walking. On the surface of the door, a magnificent carving of the founder, King Charles, was engraved. It was the King's private room.

After confirming it with the Imperial Guards who stood at the door side, Bodwin turned around and faced Massas.

“You are not to speak a single word. You will only listen.”

He was saying Massas could listen into the King's room. Though he hesitated, the man's complexion did not change. He faced the cat-eyed man as if possessed.

Ignoring his worries, Massas brought his face close to the door.

--- I can hear something. A faint noise. It's hard to hear, but it sounds like stone or wood hitting against one another.

After about ten seconds, Massas separated from the doorway. He spoke to Bodwin.

“What is His Majesty doing...?”

“He is playing with blocks.”

Massas face tightened. He nearly shouted.

Bodwin bowed to the Imperial Guards and moved down the corridor. Massas followed after him; the two returned to their previous room.

Massas sat in the chair in disbelief having heard the true nature of those sounds. Sweat floated to his face and hands; his heart throbbed violently enough that he could feel pain.

King Faron of Brune was a 41 year old man. He was excellent in both domestic affairs and diplomacy before he took to the throne. He had not changed at all once he became King, which led to an increase in the prosperity of the people. He brought peace to the nation.

Massas had seen King Faron's reign as a local aristocrat. The shock was great.

“Who knows about this...?”

“Including me, not many. There are few people who have been reported to regarding the King's illness. Dukes Thenardier, Ganelon, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs understand his condition.”

Massas looked at Bodwin suspiciously. He would not show him this much or explain this far just because they were acquaintances.

The cat-faced Prime Minister read Massas' questioning gaze and continued to feign ignorance.

“The affairs of the state have stagnated in the Royal Palace. There have been many debates as to how we should deal with this.”

--- So that's why my petition was ignored.

Massas considered it, but the words Bodwin spoke next were beyond his expectation.

“Political affairs were divided in two. The issues regarding the aristocracy was left to Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier while we handle the rest. Even if we had not, we did not have the power to intervene with their matters purely out of suspicion.”

A voice leaked from Massas mouth, his face now strong with anger. The old Earl spoke in a gentle tone, despite his rage.

“Then... We must wait until either Thenardier or Ganelon fall? No matter what, we must simply watch from the side?”

It had to do with the alignment of the aristocracy's interests. It may be necessary to have nobles with wide connections take action. Normally, the King would take care of this matter, but powerful nobles who were loyal to the King could cope with such tasks fairly well.

“We do not have a way to fight Dukes Thenardier and Ganelon.”

“You cannot move the Knights?”

“If we civil servants join a third force, domestic turmoil would only grow. This would increase the number of attacks coming from the neighboring countries.”

Should the defenders of the country be moved for domestic affairs, the borders would be undermanned, so it was rare that they were moved for such reasons.

“What happens to those families associated with Thenardier and Ganelon? They can easily arbitrate things in their own interests. Will such high-handed actions be overlooked?”

Bodwin clearly understood.

Though Massas was frustrated already, he threw out another question in a quiet voice.

“Tigre... Tigrevurmud Vorn, in order to defend his lands, he employed the Zhcted Army. Even so, will the judgment be any different?”

“You believe he will not rebel against the Kingdom of Brune?”

Bodwin responded clearly as Massas let out a heavy breath.

“--- He asked for help from the very people who assaulted Dinant.”

“Even when Alsace was under attack by Duke Thenardier, the Kingdom did not send a single Knight; He judged his family, his land, and his people to be

abandoned by His Majesty! How can the Kingdom claim treason when it feigns such ignorance!"

Massas stood with passion and struck his palm against the desk. Bodwin also stood up, knocking his chair over in the process, and tightly grasped the table.

"Do you truly believe the Zhcted Army is doing this out of a sense of judgment and benevolence?"

"You were told before hand! They were employed! They are acting as mercenaries!"

"Sophistry! Even if they do not act in the name of their country, even if he employed them as mercenaries, when they bare fangs of aggression, can Earl Vorn truly stop their violence!?"

"What is done is done! You are simply ignoring his tragic plight! Are you so afraid of what may happen that you are not reflecting on what has come to pass!?"

An intense atmosphere ran inside the room. The elderly man and the Prime Minister faced each other in anger.

Both Massas and Bodwin took deep breaths to expel their anger.

“--- Massas.”

In a quiet voice, Bodwin called to Massas who had turned away.

“I cannot change what I say. No matter how you petition, no matter what arguments you may have, no matter the reason, he drew the army from a foreign nation into our lands. He must be judged a rebel.”

Massas gave thought to raise his voice, but he chose to wait. The cat-faced Prime Minister continued.

“From this point forward, I will be speaking to myself.. In this country, there is only one person who cannot be charged with the sin of rebellion when bringing the army of another country into our lands.”

Massas looked doubtful. Was there such a person? It would be impossible to avoid being disgraced as a rebel should one do that, even for Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier.

“The only way this is possible is to obtain permission from His Majesty. For example, if you were to convince the wife of Duke Thenardier who is His Majesty's niece, or perhaps Duke Ganelon's brother; either way, you need to convince someone with a place near the throne. Given their position, something large must happen for this to occur.”

“... In other words, for Tigre to assert his own justification, he must further accelerate the confusion.”

Massas frowned as he stroked his gray beard wildly.

“You may interpret it as you wish. I wish to support Brune. My only wish is for its survival. Now then, I must be off, Earl.”

Once he finished speaking, Bodwin left the room. Massas turned around and let out a deep breath as he stared at the door.

“... How troublesome.”

It was clear. He would obtain no help, but it was good that he had received an answer.

--- Anyway, we need to get rid of Duke Thenardier.

At a brisk pace, slow enough not to disregard manners, Massas left the palace. The sun had gone down, and the white marble was dyed vermillion.

The sword he entrusted to the guards at the second rampart was returned. Massas passed through the popular garden and stopped his feet.

He perceived a glance with murderous intent.

--- *An assassin?*

He did not think it strange. Both Thenardier and Ganelon would feel Massas a hindrance. They would find it necessary to punish him for his meeting in the Royal Palace.

--- *It's good I won't involve others.*

Placing his hand on the hilt of his sword, Massas looked at the surroundings.

In this vast garden, many skillfully made sculptures dotted the land. The thick foliage and flower beds were

elaborate, and gave a vivid color to the surroundings. There was no shortage of places to hide, so it was simple for an assassin to move about.

While searching for the position of the blood thirst, Massas walked forward and stopped before a certain sculpture.

--- Not good. He's behind me.

He was covered in a cold sweat. It was dangerous to move any further. Against the backdrop of sculptures, Massas pulled out his sword. A shadow appeared, a bright light reflecting off a drawn blade.

Massas countered with a side blow while escaping from the enemy's attack by rolling on the ground.

--- There are too many...!

His movements stopped when Massas looked up. There, he saw a woman jump into his field of view.

She wore a pale green dress, and her golden hair was tinged red by the evening sun. In her delicate hands was a bishop staff which surpassed the sculptures about the flower bed.

The assassins also noticed the woman. One began to run toward her.

“Not good, Run!”

While avoiding a sword approaching him, Massas shouted out. Though the assassins continued to attack him, he was able to keep an eye on her.

The assassin raised his sword to the woman.

A clear metallic sound was heard as a glittering gold light blew him away. Both Massas and the assassins looked on in surprise.

The woman with gold hair pushed the sword aside with her bishop staff and knocked the assassin down simultaneously. Massas could barely follow her movements.

“... Oh my.”

A light voice, unsuitable to the intense atmosphere, came from her mouth. However, it was not because she did not understand the situation.

Both Massas and the assassins understood based on her nonchalant behavior.

The assassins separated. Three attacked Massas while the remaining attacked the woman.

--- *There are so many!*

Massas mowed the sword approaching him away. Blood flew through the air, dying the grass and flowers red.

Though inferior in terms of number, the assassins did not expect the emergence of such a formidable enemy. Their fright and impatience dulled their movements, which was not missed by Massas. Quickly moving through the flower bed, he cut the second person down.

By the time Massas had finished the three off, the woman brandishing the bishop staff struck the flower bed.

A smile floated to the golden haired woman's face as the assassins fell behind her.

“... Splendid.”

Though Massas uttered those words, he was looking at her ample bosoms spilling out from her pale green dress. Whether it was tribute to that is unknown.

“Thank you for helping me. I am Massas Rodant, the one in charge of Aude to the north of His Majesty's capital. May I have your name?”

“My, so you are Earl Rodant.”

She laughed as though she had good luck. The golden haired woman returned her gaze and gave her name.

“I am Sophia Obertas, a Vanadis of the Kingdom of Zhcted.”

“... So that's how it is. Sophia is my benefactor.”

Massas finished with that. Of course, he did not speak of his exchange with Bodwin or mention that the King had reverted to a childhood state.

Augre turned to Sophie and bowed deeply.

“I wish to thank you for aiding Lord Massas, truly.”

“There is no need to worry about it.”

Sophie returned a nod and a smile.

“Afterward, I investigated Tigre's location and sent a messenger to Aude to gather soldiers. Sophie headed here ahead of time while I met up with my army.”

“Thank you for telling us everything. You really came at a critical moment.”

With a pure, straightforward gaze, Ellen thanked Massas.

“Will you tell me what is happening on your end now? Judging from the colors, it seems the Navarre Knights are your enemy...”

“Allow me to explain.”

Lim continued the story while answering Massas' questions along the way since she was the last to meet the old Knight from those present. Ellen and Augre supplemented explanations as needed. When she finished, Massas had a difficult face.

“By the way, about Bodwin. Do you know what measures he is taking against Lord Tigrevurmud?”

Lim asked because she was worried Alsace would eventually be controlled by the government.

“He intends to place all responsibility for this war on Tigre. Alsace will be made into government-controlled area. For the time being, Thenardier and Ganelon will not be able to interfere with his lands.”

“In that case, we are not allowed to enter as well.”

As if in response to Lim's doubts, Augre spoke while rubbing his chin with the palm of his hand.

“For now, they have self autonomy. Earl Vorn... No, I suppose he should be called Lord Tigrevurmud at this time. In short, the Prime Minister is trying to avoid having him enter those lands.”

“It would be a problem if an area under control of the government joins a rebel's cause.”

Massas frowned and let out a deep breath.

“That Bodwin. He was looking pretty smug, so this is what he did. Right now, it's aristocrat against aristocrat... A private battle between Tigre and Thenardier.”

“Since Tigre is a rebel, wouldn't it be more appropriate to say it's Tigre against Brune?”

Ellen asked. Massas nodded regretfully.

“If that were not the case, they could not have made their move. They had their troops from the west cross the country. There must be a large number of Knights from Navarre, though they may call for more if they feel they cannot win against the Zhcted Army.”

Ellen and Sophie looked at each other. It was not possible for them to win. In today's battle, they were severely damaged.

“Though I do not like to say it, this truly is the strength of Duke Thenardier. From what Limlisha was saying, we know he has the strength to move the Knights of Navarre, and he also has ties to Ludmira. He would not be able to do these things if he did not have such power.”

Augre began to complain. Having a large number of connections was not enough. Thenardier had the ability to take proper advantage of them.

“We can't stop here. I'm a bit hesitant to use my trump card... This really is annoying.”

They could not just sit there in admiration. They needed to move with the Navarre Knights present.

“Eleanora-sama, will it be impossible without using that power against Roland?”

“Impossible. He's that strong.”

Ellen shook her head briefly.

“His power and technique are completely abnormal, and he has that sword. Durandal, was it? What on earth is that?”

While patting the sheath of the longsword on her knees, Ellen told the story of how he had broken through Sophie's Dragonic ^{Veda} Skill. Though it was difficult to believe so suddenly, Sophie confirmed what happened.

Massas and Augre looked at one another. The two only knew the sacred sword Durandal had been passed down the generations amongst the Royal Family of Brune.

“I'm sorry I cannot be of help.”

Massas bowed his head. Ellen waved her hands hastily

“No, don't worry about it.”

She could not properly explain the Dragonic ^{Viralt} Tool and Dragonic Skill to them, even if many soldiers had already witnessed it.

“Right now, I'm the only one that can be his opponent. Tigre is injured, as well. Lim, sorry to say this, but I can't let you do this.”

Lim was about to say she would lead the attack against Roland, but she was cut off preemptively. No words of rebuttal came to her mind.

Of the people other than Ellen, even Rurick could not hold Roland off. She had learned that in the disaster of today's battle.

Though it was difficult to imagine, Roland could easily defeat one hundred, or even two hundred, troops, if they had surrounded him. The speed, strength, and sharpness of Durandal was beyond common sense.

“We could set pitfalls beforehand. He will likely take the lead next time as well.”

“I doubt it will work. I have heard Roland has a powerful intuition and can find traps in an instant. Sachstein prepared many of them, but Roland managed to avoid them all.”

Massas words reminded Ellen of a beast.

“He may be delayed by a fence or a moat, but I doubt that... It is not like he is a private soldier from some aristocrat's army.”

Fighting with the Knights was no different from fighting against the Kingdom.

Even in today's battle, before the fight began, morale was low. It had only fallen further after their defeat. If they lost again, the Brune soldiers would collapse.

“Viscount Augre. What of the other nobles?”

“It seems they are weak willed now.”

When the old Viscount replied, Lim nodded lightly.

“Please, try to maintain the situation. Even if they are few in number, they will fight, so long as their leader remains steady.”

Ellen thought about the battle which would continue tomorrow.

Though she wanted to give the soldiers a day or two to rest, the Knights of Navarre would not allow it.

Ellen suddenly stood and placed her longsword at her waist.

“Let's go see how Tigre is doing.”

They entered his tent and saw Tigre, Teita, and Batran.

Tigre was sleeping, breathing deeply. Teita was working hard to nurse him. Batran had come to visit and was helping her work.

“... He's finally asleep.”

While rolling bandages about Tigre's body, Teita let loose a sigh of relief. Her clothes were dirty with sweat and blood, stained clothes were scattered about the vicinity.

When she had seen Tigre being carried on a stretcher, she nearly fainted. There was a large wound across his body, and his clothes were stained even through the leather armor.

His wound was hot, and, even with a cloth applied to his body, it would not close up. She had used alcohol to

disinfect his wound and wiped an ointment on the injury before wrapping him in bandages soaked in a medicine prescribed by the doctor.

“Tigre-sama...”

Teita dried off the sweat on his body with a cloth. Her fingers were wrinkled from the liquid, and were swollen and red.

--- *Gods of Brune, King of the Gods, Perkunas, Mother Goddess Mosha...*

While reciting the names of nine of the ten Gods Brune believed in, Teita joined her hands in prayer in desperation. Only to the Goddess of Death, Tir na Fa, did she not call out to.

--- *Please, Please save Tigre-sama.*

At that time, a voice was heard from outside the curtain. Teita stood up alongside Batran.

“Teita. Keep an eye on him.”

Batran left the tent where several men stood. Their ages varied, and not all wore leather armor.

--- I've seen his face somewhere.

Thinking of that, Batran remembered immediately. They were men who disputed with both those from Alsace and Zhcted. They were soldiers and the aristocrat of Territoire whom Augre had brought.

“Hey... Um... Is the General all right?”

Hesitantly, one man asked.

Batran nodded solemnly.

“Though it is a serious injury, his life should be safe.”

When he answered them, an expression of relief floated to their faces. After a quick bow, they left. Having thought the tent would be invaded, Batran looked at them dubiously.

--- How wonderful.

It was not just them. While Teita was caring for Tigre, many other soldiers had appeared.

From another tent, many groans and screams of injured soldiers could be heard. There were some voices

of encouragement and shouts as well. In a situation like this, any timid person would wish to run away in the night.

--- *Young Lord...*

Batran seemed as if he could weep at any moment, further distorting his wrinkled face. The little old man had been with the Vorn family since Tigre's father, Urz, was alive. He had known Tigre from the moment of his birth and loved him like a son.

--- *Urz-sama. The Young Lord is still necessary for Alsace. Please, keep him healthy.*

"Hey."

A sudden voice called out to Batran. He looked up in surprise to see Ellen standing before him.

"What were you talking about with the people who just left?"

Batran did not like Ellen. Though he felt an obligation to remain kind to her for helping Tigre defend Alsace, he still wanted to keep his distance.

--- I wish the Young Lord and Teita could be happy...

However, because Batran had served by his side for many years, he was knowledgeable of the hierarchical relationship within an army. In terms of position, Ellen was equal or above Tigre, and Tigre would not want him to oppose her.

“The soldiers were anxious about the Young Lord's health.”

He replied obediently. Ellen wore a mysterious expression.

“Are they soldiers from Alsace?”

Batran shook his head.

“They are soldiers brought by Viscount Augre. I have heard many have come to visit him.

Ellen looked wide eyed at Batran in surprise.

“How is Tigre?”

“He is asleep.”

“I wish to see him. May I enter?”

“... If Teita is fine with it.”

Given his position, Batran could not say what he wished to.

Ellen smiled and nodded and entered through the curtain next to the elder man.

Teita looked back when Batran called her name and was surprised to see Ellen. Her face showed her exhaustion, and she looked troubled.

“What business do you have?”

“Just for a while, would you mind letting me see Tigre alone? It's nothing important, just... I have something I wanted to say.”

Teita hesitated for a moment. Tigre had finally fallen asleep, so she did not want others to see him if possible. Besides, she could not think of what she might want to say to someone who was sleeping.

However, seeing her sad expression, she hesitated to refuse. It was her first time seeing Ellen like that.

“... I understand, but please be careful. He has just fallen asleep. If something happens, please call me immediately. I will wait outside.”

Ellen nodded strongly and smiled at Teita.

When she saw the girl with the chestnut-brown hair leave, Ellen removed all sound with the Silver Flash at her waist and kneeled down. She looked at Tigre's body under the light. His upper body was bare, wrapped in layers of bandages.

“--- You really did save me today.”

Having been knocked off her horse, Ellen very well could have been struck down by the Black Knight.

Ellen quietly took Tigre's hand and placed it to her left breast.

“Tigre. My voice may not reach you in your sleep, so please, listen to my heart through your palm. Feel my life . Hear my feelings.”

Tigre did not react. Ellen continued as she was.

“I witnessed your bravery before Roland with my very eyes. With only your bow in hand, you rushed forward. I was amazed. But... more than that, I was happy.”

Ellen's smile turned bitter, and her voice became angry

.

“But you were injured this much. You are the General of the army. Who will defend Alsace if you are gone? Who will lead the soldiers?”



Power entered her hands as she pressed Tigre's hand strongly against her chest.

“... I heard the soldiers of Brune have come to look at you. They look terrible, they're relying on you. They're trying to find some pillar of support.”

Roland was a powerful existence.

That man, like a storm, destroyed all things before him, allowing his men to advance. His very existence was the reason the soldiers could not remain brave. As the one who took down his horse, Tigre had become something of an object of reverence amongst them.

“No... Maybe it is not the soldiers who want to rely on you but me.”

Those words inadvertently spilled from Ellen's lips.

He had gone forward with courage. When the soldiers saw him carried off the battlefield in a stretcher, a strong remorse ran through them.

He could not afford to remove his mask of courage until the war ended.

At that time, Tigre's hands moved. Ellen's hands clasped his tightly.

Ellen was surprised, and she smiled. Even if he was unconscious, Tigre was encouraging her in his own way. She thought so.

“... Tigre. I will protect your soldiers. I will protect those you wish to defend. Because you are mine.”

So hurry and wake up.

Ellen muttered those final words and squeezed Tigre's hand strongly once more before standing up and leaving the tent. She stood before Teita and Batran.

“I'm sorry.”

“... Are you finished with your business?”

“Yeah. I told him everything I wanted to.”

Ellen responded with an out-of-place smile. Strangely enough, she was feeling refreshed. Suddenly, a strong wind blew; the bonfire near the curtain flickered violently. The guards looked about in a panic as a small wind blew in Ellen's hair from the sword at her waist.

“What's wrong, Arifal?”

Ellen stroked the pommel of her longsword and looked at the sky. The moon and stars were spread throughout the sky; a cold wind blew from above.

--- Incidentally, Tigre said it would rain.

“How is Lord Tigrevurmud?”

A familiar voice. Sophie approached with her bishop staff in hand. Ellen explained with a fearless smile as she saw her fellow Vanadis approach.

“He won't die. Not in a place like this.”

Ellen had seen his hand move. The hand she had grasped was warm. He had a will to live, a clear vitality.

“That's why I'll be fighting Roland until he wakes up.”

“I see. I thought that might be---”

Sophie's bishop staff made a sound as she smiled radiantly.

“Allow me to help, Ellen.”

Ellen looked as if she could not agree.

“You have come as a messenger. It would become a problem if they found out you helped in battle.”

“Then we simply need to keep it a secret.”

Sophie responded with a slightly mischievous voice.

“Rather than fighting the Black Knight alone, would it not be better to face him with two?”

Ellen's mouth distorted as she played with her silver-white hair. Arifal let loose a wind as if in agreement with Sophie. Ellen's hesitation was cut short.

“I suppose that's for the best. I'll gladly borrow your strength.”

“I will do my best – Will I be using my Dragon^{Veda}ic Skill as well?”

Though her tone and expression were of a joking nature, Ellen responded seriously and bluntly.

“We'll use it.”

Contrary to what one might believe, Sophie simply nodded in confirmation as she brought her finger to her face.

“Ellen, I will give you some advice... though I suppose it will not really matter for you. We are Vanadis. We are not to be human.”

She spoke as if she had read Ellen's mind completely. Sophie smiled and walked away.

After seeing her off, Ellen returned to the others. Lim, Massas, and Augre surrounded a map and were discussing strategy beneath a lamp.

“How is Lord Tigrevurmud?”

Lim asked with her typical unfriendly expression, but Ellen saw the emotion deep in her blue eyes.

“You saw him as well? Since he was asleep, I did not think you would be able to.”

Lim shook her head while Augre looked at Ellen in curiosity.

“In his current state, Earl Vorn should be fine, right?”

“I don't know.”

All they could do was to allow Teita to take care of him. Until his wound was fully healed, he would remain haunted by the shadow of death.

Even so, Ellen spoke with an attitude as if she did not have to worry about him.

One person continued to look at her inquisitively.

“By the way, have you decided what to do in the future?”

Ellen loudly declared her answer to Lim.

“Tonight, we're going to the river up north.”

After Ellen left the tent, Teita continued to nurse him.

“... Teita. You need to rest as well. I will look after the Young Lord.”

Batran spoke to Teita. Though tired, she was still hesitant.

“May I sleep near Tigre-sama?”

“Yes. I'm sure he'll be happy to hold your hand in his rest.”

Teita bowed to Batran and lay next to Tigre, quietly grasping his left hand. Because it was the hand with which he grasped his bow, it was rough.

--- He was bleeding so badly, his hand was covered in blood..

.

Teita remembered when she saw Tigre.

“I will rest for just a moment. Tigre-sama, please open your eyes.”

Closing her eyes, Teita fell deep into slumber.

Batran looked at Teita. After checking that she had gone to sleep, he quietly cleaned up the bloody bandages around them.

In the General's tent, the three people looked at Ellen in confusion.

“... If possible, please explain this in detail.”

Massas offered a feather cushion for Ellen to sit down on.

“I remembered Tigre said it would rain tonight.”

“It will rain...?”

Lim dropped her eyesight to the map and looked at the river to the north.

“If it rains, the Navarre Knights will have dull movements.”

Augre nodded in consent.

They were covered in heavy armor and helmet and held a heavy shield with a spear or longsword. Though they boasted a formidable power when rushing, their movements would slow down if they were covered in mud.

The Zhcted cavalry had the advantage of mobility.

“Though I feel bad about it, I'll be counting on your hard work again, Viscount Augre.”

When Ellen asked him to work hard, the old Viscount began laughing, little by little.

“I see. Your army does not wear a full set of armor. Once soaked, you will encircle them.”

“But I wonder if we can win tomorrow's battle like this .”

Without moving her eyes from the map, Lim threw out a question.

“We can probably do it.”

Massas muttered as he looked at the map.

“The Navarre Knights are strong, but none are as strong as Roland. They will also collapse if they are attacked from behind.”

“That's right. We'll separate Roland from his Knights somehow and take them on separately.”

Her hair of silver-white drifted as the Vanadis laughed .

“Thanks to Lord Massas, we roughly understand the situation in the Royal Capital. For now, we will send two messengers to establish contact with Roland. Even if he does not see them, we will be able to buy a little more time, and we will get a better idea of the situation.”

“What do you mean?”

Massas inclined his head and stroked his beard since he could not understand what she meant. Ellen crossed her arms across her chest and answered in a serious tone.

“To see if he knows or is interested in why the Zhcted Army is stationed here. We do not know if he is acting as a leader or a soldier.”

“... True, we do not know much about the situation.”

Lim placed her hand to her mouth and began to think.

The reasons soldiers fight could be for food, a salary, or for exploits. In general, soldiers fight for realistic things. It was rare they would trust their Commander for his popularity and bravery. Still, while that was true, there were exceptions.

However, a leader was different. In the first place, they were the type to gather soldiers to fight their battle.

If he had a firm reason to fight, they could think about it and increase their potential options.

“Lim. Tell me why Tigre fights.”

“He is prioritizing the safety of his people. Also, he wishes to punish Duke Thenardier for his cruel actions. He wishes to have him pay reparations, and he also wishes to remain neutral in the future civil war. Those are his four goals.”

Lim answered smoothly without hesitation. Ellen smiled satisfactorily.

“That's right. Although his strength is much weaker than Thenardier's, he has a reason to fight. Even then, I believe the Knight's leader, even when commanding so many Knights, does not know of it.”

“... Speaking frankly, I do not believe he would believe the words of his enemy.”

Lim's blue eyes narrowed in thought. Ellen continued to nod.

“It is possible Roland's reason to fight is only because
Zirnitra
the Black Dragon Flag is flying within Brune.”

“If your thoughts are correct, then he is likely sending Earl Vorn's messengers away so as not to confuse his Knights with excess information.”

Augre's wrinkled face distorted even further.

“Roland is fighting us. He is likely looking for detailed information on us that he can trust. If he understands that Tigre's actions were unavoidable, we may be able to open negotiations.”

As Ellen had said, it soon began to rain.

The Silver Meteor Army began their march. The cold drained their physical strength, and the rain dampened their spirits. Their clothes grew heavier with the rain while their shoes only became more mud-covered as they walked.

“You can use double the wood to keep warm. You're also allowed to drink a little alcohol.”

It would be necessary to fight the Navarre Knights in the morning. There was a need to cheer up the troops.

There were some who felt the desperation in their situation. There were those who knew it would be hopeless to run away in the dark of night. There were others who feared Roland's bravery and thought of the doom of defeat.

There were many who were deeply impressed by Tigre's bravery when he fought, but there were also those whose will to fight decreased due to his injury. No, if anything, that was most predominant.

When the night grew old, they arrived at their destination. Viscount Augre visited Ellen's tent.

"I am off to make preparations, Lord Vanadis."

After a short rest, Augre and his soldiers were to move out. Accompanied by Tigre and the injured and non-combatants, they numbered approximately one thousand.

Whether they would be fine or not, Ellen did not know. She understood it was a difficult situation; still, it was best for those who could not fight to be away from the

battlefield. Knowing this, she sent them with Augre on his task.

“Is everything necessary prepared? It's best to be more ready.”

“It's fine.”

The old Viscount struck his chest.

“This is Territoire. It is my land. There is no need to worry.”

Ellen stood up and shook Augre's hand, promising to reunite tomorrow.

The Navarre Knights were located twenty belsta (approximately twenty kilometers) southwest of the Silver Meteor Army.

Though most were resting in preparation for the fight the next day, Roland was not yet tired. Roland was drinking a glass of wine as he sat with his Vice-Commander, Olivier.

“Did you find anything out about Earl Vorn?”

Hearing Olivier's report, a strong light shined in Roland's eyes. More information had arrived.

“Yes. Do you know of Dinant? Where Prince Regnas was killed?”

Hearing Olivier's words, Roland closed his eyes and nodded. He offered a silent prayer on the day he heard the story. He had not forgotten.

“In the battle, Earl Vorn became a prisoner of war. Until then, Zhcted had not known he was in charge of the lands bordering their country.”

“He did not seem like a person with ambition. Was it Zhcted?”

“About that... It seems there were many movements amongst Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon's armies during his absence from Alsace.”

“--- For what reason?”

Roland frowned. He was thinking Alsace must have been a good land for both to take action. Olivier simply laughed sarcastically.

“If I must speak honestly, that territory is insufficient, no matter how you look at it. Perhaps they had some use for it, but I don't understand for what reason they might have. All I know is, based on the testimonies, their armies took action.”

Roland made a bitter face as he looked at the sword leaning against the table by his side. He felt it unpleasant that they would move their armies for their personal greed.

“... And His Majesty?”

It was the King's duty to place pressure on nobles who act recklessly. If Thenardier and Ganelon moved their soldiers indiscriminately, that was the first thing he should do.

“You refer to any movements in the vicinity? Wasn't His Majesty in no condition to give orders at the time?”

“His command... That's right, he was in his sickbed, so he would not have been able to issue them.”

Olivier's response which was speculative in nature worried Roland.

Basically, the Knights could not move without the orders of the King. Arbitrary actions necessitated punishment.

That much was natural. They were stationed near the mountains for a reason. Any unnecessary movement may invite trouble.

Olivier continued to speak with a look of sympathy having seen Roland tightly grasp his fist.

“Alsace was attacked by Thenardier's soldiers, but the Zhcted Army crossed the border and defeated them. Ganelon's troops turned back on the way to Alsace.”

“Then Earl Vorn invited the Zhcted Army into the country to defend his lands?”

Olivier shrugged his shoulders.

“If you're worried, why not ask Vorn? However, the Zhcted Army seems to be moving a bit suspiciously.”

“What of Earl Vorn's reputation?”

“I have received some information regarding that. If you ignore his skill in the military arts, his reputation is not particularly poor. I found a long letter from Auguste of the Calvados cavalry. Much of his achievements were dismissed because he was a man of Alsace.”

“Please show me the letter.”

Three pieces of paper from a larger bundle were pulled out and given to Roland. Roland took it in hand and looked over it silently.

Roland knew Auguste was a direct and trustworthy man. They had worked together many times before he was assigned to the Navarre Knights, so he was interested in his opinion.

His letter spoke indifferently of Tigre and his father, Urz.

--- Though his bow technique is superior, his skill otherwise is ordinary. If there is fault in him, it is that he thinks of his people just as much as his father. For that, he does not fear the stigma of disgrace and will borrow the power of others.

Those were his exact feelings toward Tigrevurmud Vorn.

--- If His Majesty ordered it...

The Knight is the sword and the shield of the Kingdom. Roland had a sworn duty to protect the people and subjugate the enemy.

Standing on the border, he had warded off many enemies. It was a worthwhile task.

Suddenly, Roland recalled the legend of his name.

It was the story Prince Faron had spoken of. Roland, the [Knight of Knights], was the greatest defense.

“--- Olivier.”

Roland took his eyes off the letter and looked up to his trusted aide.

“What do you think of this battle?”

Roland asked him as a Knight of Navarre.

This fight was not for King Faron. It was an order passed down from Duke Thenardier and Ganelon.

His loyalty as a Knight was to the King. It was only this loyalty he felt pride in. For this reason alone, he fought to protect his land, but he could not remove the sense that he was simply being used by powerful aristocrats.

Olivier's response was roundabout.

“We are proud of being Knights. We place our faith in you.”

They had a mission to protect Brune, and they believed Roland's command would help them accomplish it. That was what he meant.

Roland looked at Olivier who shook his hand, showing his understanding.

“We will move according to schedule. I will handle the Vanadis. I will leave command to you to do as you see fit .”

They had experience fighting off the Sachstein army along the western border. Olivier nodded without any sign of nervousness because he was accustomed to it.

“But what of the issue with Earl Vorn?”

“It is certain he has brought the Zhcted Army into our lands. That is enough.”

It was dangerous for the Navarre Knights if their Commander faltered here. Roland was fully aware of it.

Tir na Fa

The rain ended at dawn. Though it was a refreshing winter day with a cloudless sky, the ground was muddy enough to get even the knees messy.

Against the river, the Silver Meteor Army looked to the south. They had sent out many scouts to monitor the movements of Navarre, but otherwise, they were resting. Forty-three hundred troops remained; the injured had already been moved away.

After ending her break, Ellen took command and started acting.

On the other side were the Knights of Navarre numbering nearly five thousand. Due to their victory in battle the day before, their morale was much higher.

However, their actions would be slow due to the mud on the ground.

Not to mention, they were moving on horses.

However, Roland did not panic nor rush. From his experience, the ground would be more stable during the day.

“Earl Vorn's army seems to have fewer than five thousand.”

Olivier reported the information he received from a scout to Roland.

“More fell than expected.”

It was Roland's impression. The fact they were still fighting meant they had a plan.

“Though they have their back to the river, they moved away and headed south.”

Olivier continued in a prudent tone.

“Also... It seems they left their wounded on the other side of the river. It seems Tigrevurmud Vorn is also there .”

Roland's eyebrow moved slightly. He was certain there was a faint response when they crossed paths; however, since it involved the morale of the army, they should have desperately hidden the injury of their General. It was doubtful they would let everyone know the next day.

“... Is it a trap?”

Since the enemy was injured, furthermore, if it was the General, it would be foolish not to aim for him.

However, if he advanced that way, Roland would expose his back to the enemy to the south. Much like the battle yesterday, it had shaken his troops. Though the Knights of Navarre were powerful, he wanted to avoid a repeat situation.

“The chance exists; we can't say it is an impossibility. The Knights here also caught sight of Earl Vorn's injury. It seems they're thinking along the same lines as us and wish to challenge us before mid day... In other words, while the ground is still soft.”

They would not run away from the challenge. Furthermore, the enemy had decreased significantly due to their injuries. After thinking for a short moment, Roland made his decision.

“Leave the injured. We will fight the main force.”

--- Earl Vorn is a noble of a small region with few soldiers. If we annihilate the Zhcted Army, he will surrender.

“I understand. By the way, Roland. In today's battle... Shall we use [Crescent Moon]?”

[Crescent Moon], like [Spear], was a formation. Roland quickly realized why Olivier proposed it; it was because the earth was softened by the rain.

While [Spear] had a great destructive force, it had a weakness since it was primarily a rush. Massas exploited them from behind because of this.

That risk would disappear with [Crescent Moon].

Olivier had sent out many scouts to check the geographical features of the surroundings. He confirmed there was no large lake of mud; even so, he was still acting cautiously.

“Very well. I leave the formation to you.”

When Tigre awoke, the sun had risen considerably. Though it was late in the morning, it was too early to call afternoon.

He tried to sit up and groaned due to the pain running down his chest and flank.

--- *Ah, I see. I was cut...*

Though he had tilted his body as much as possible to avoid being injured, the sharpness and speed of Roland's blade surpassed his expectations. However, because his body was still in one piece, it seems he made the correct decision. His fate was also good.

--- *I wonder what the situation is...*

He had not fully woken up and stared in a daze at the ceiling. He noticed someone sitting nearby.

--- *Batran?*

The old man and the maid of petite stature and chestnut-brown hair were sleeping where they sat. Teita was covered in a blanket and was looking at him, the noise of her breathing quietly sounded.

Though he attempted to speak, his throat was parched.

He sat up so as to not awake the two. Tigre quietly slipped out of the tent.

Outside his tent, there were few soldiers present. The only ones present were the injured.

The sky was clear, as if the violence of the past few days had not happened.

Still, it was an empty winter sky. The air was cold and the sun was bright. It helped comfort the pain in his body .

They were in a meadow near the wilderness. If he strained his ears, he could hear the sound of water; there was a river close by.

“Tigre-sama...?”

A hoarse voice with a faint surprise was heard behind him.

He turned around and saw Teita standing there. She stood stunned before running up to Tigre with a tearful face. Though she clung to him, she avoided his wounds.

“Tigre-sama...”

Tigre gently stroked the head of the maid who looked up at him with large tears in her eyes. Tigre tapped the shoulders of his old friend, Batran, who had followed after Teita and was choking back tears. He thanked them for their care.

After drinking water and eating the porridge Teita heated, Tigre asked for a briefing of what had happened while he was out.

“... So we lost. The main unit is in Orange Plains while the injured are on this side of the river.”

“Yes. It would be terrible for the injured if the battle is lost.”

“Honestly. Still, it's a good thing Lord Massas arrived.”

Teita nodded cheerfully hearing Tigre's words. She seemed happy to report this, and Tigre let out an involuntary smile when thinking about it. They were safe , giving him a sense of relief.

Tigre tilted his head when he heard Sophie remained behind, however.

--- True, Sophie would not likely abandon Ellen...

However, he was unsure whether Ellen would accept her help. Sophie had come as a messenger, and Ellen would likely keep her from the battlefield.

“Ah, that's right. I have a letter addressed to Tigre-sama from Sophia-sama.”

Teita stood up as soon as she remembered and ran away at a brisk pace.

Batran watched her move away happily. He stood up and bowed to Tigre before leaving to check on the other soldiers.

Having heard the general situation, Tigre felt impatient.

Ellen, Lim, Massas, and Augre, and now Sophie as well.

Certainly, I was seriously injured, but should I remain here?

Teita returned with letter in hand. Tigre opened the seal with a knife.

The contents of the letter was spelled out in flowing brush strokes. The contents recorded astonished him.

--- Her ^{Veda}Dragon^{ic} Skill was negated...?

It was written in her letter. When she faced the enemy Commander, Roland, the Black Sword, Durandal, had destroyed her barriers. The letter finished with saying she and Ellen would challenge him together.

Tigre was filled with horror. He was a natural enemy for the Vanadis.

His impatience grew. As he put power into his body, his mouth let out a sound as his wound sharply pained him. Teita looked at him with concern and supported Tigre as he endured.

“Tigre-sama...?”

“No... I'm fine.”

After answering her, he put the letter in his clothes. Supporting him, Teita took Tigre to have his bandages changed.

“Does your wound still hurt?”

“No. I've had plenty of rest; there is almost no pain.”

Actually, it still hurt quite a bit, but he did not want to scare his maid who was like a younger sister.

Teita began to remove the bandages from Tigre's body and carefully brought her hand to his body.

“I'll start now.”

With those words, he clenched his teeth and held his breath. The cloth was pulled aside; the scabs were peeled . Tigre bore with the pain as Teita gazed at the deep red fluid coming from his wound.

“... It does not look infected.”

After taking a breath in relief, the two looked at each other and smiled.

She wiped the blood away from the wound, and bandaged it with clean cloth soaked in medicine. She began re-rolling the cloth over his body.

“That is all.”

Teita spoke with a smile. Tigre gave his thanks.

“It's your turn now.”

After saying that, Tigre pulled the medicine case from her.

The maid with chestnut-brown hair looked at him doubtfully as she brought her hands forward.

Teita's fingers were swollen and red; the back of her hand was rough. It looked as if she had blood all over her fingers.

Teita looked down in embarrassment, her face dyed red.

“To think your fingers would become like this. You must have been caring for me for so long. I don't wish for you to be hurt.”

“That's... It is natural.”

Her voice seemed to disappear, though she managed to respond. Tigre pulled out an ointment from the case and rubbed it over the wounds on Teita's fingers.

“I was able to recover early because of you. Thanks, Teita.”

Tigre gave his thanks again and bowed his head. In this winter season, she had squeezed the water from the cloth and wiped his body. It was not even in the comfort of their house in Alsace but on the field after losing a battle.

When he finished with her right hand, he continued to apply ointment to her left. Once the medicine dried on her right hand, he rolled the bandages over it.

“Tigre-sama, though this house is small, it is still good.”

Teita smiled to resolve the tension; Tigre returned her smile as he finished applying the ointment and rolling the bandages. He was able to do this efficiently since his body remembered in his times of hunting.

Before long, the treatment had finished.

“It should be fine like this. You need to get some rest, now.”

“Thank you, Tigre-sama.”

Having endured as he rolled the bandages about her hand, she uttered her thanks in a small voice. Tigre stroked her head gently and quietly said good night.

“Tigre-sama, are you not going to rest?”

“I wish to maintain my bow.”

Tigre looked at the black bow to the side. He could see dry blood blotting it.

After he was cut by Roland, he had continued to shoot at the Knights following after them. His wounds had opened, and his blood had scattered. His blood had run down his arm and reached the bow.

--- I managed to survive this time.

He recalled the battle. A cold shiver ran down his backbone when he thought of Roland's blade pointing down at Ellen.

An ominous thought floated to his head. Tigre denied it in a panic. It could not be possible. Ellen was a Vanadis . Her dazzling smile would not be lost.

--- *However, to think Durandal has the power to deny her ^{Veda} Dragonic Skill...*

Tigre stared at his jet black bow, deep in thought.

--- *If I could use this bow's power, could I fight Roland?*

If he could draw out the power of his bow, would he be able to help Ellen?

It happened before.

Tigre's hand gripped the bow. A strange feeling ran through his body.

--- *This again? No, it's different. That time, it was not trembling. Perhaps... is this a pulse?*

He felt a pulse in the bow. It was as if it had transmitted its pulse to his hand, as if their thoughts were in harmony. His body was cold; rather, it was like a rod of ice was pushed down his spine.

The bow told him with its pulse. Tigre looked at the black bow grasped in his hand with a serious expression.

--- That's right. There is a will in this bow. It can also speak.

It was not just a beat. It was difficult to understand; as if its intent had flowed into Tigre's consciousness in accordance to that pulse.

In Dinant, he could shoot the Wy^{Vyfal}vern as the bow had advised. In the Tatra Mountains, it lent him his strength to destroy the castle gate.

It was probably no accident this time as well.

--- It's like it's trying to lead me somewhere.

He did not know if the bow understood his thoughts, but he could feel it tremble in his hands. He felt he must go.

“... Tigre-sama?”

Teita spoke quietly, wondering why he was gripping his bow in excitement. Tigre did not respond. He stood up and put on a thick mantle.

“I'll be stepping out for a moment.”

“W, what are you saying!? You need to rest!”

Teita was confused. Tigre was wounded and was asleep until just a moment ago. In order to stabilize his body, he needed to rest more. He could find no reason to give her.

Even so, Tigre was serious and shook his head stubbornly.

“Sorry, Teita. But I need to go.”

He understood Teita's thoughts, and he did not wish to throw aside her good will, but he felt the need to follow the will of his weapon.

“I don't know when I'll be back. Make sure you warm your body and get some good rest.”

Teita heard Tigre speak unexpected words.

“I will come with you as well---”

“What are you saying now?”

“That is what I should say. Where are you going, Tigre-sama?”

Tigre did not answer. The bow had only given him a vague direction; it had not specified a location or a concrete distance.

He could not think of any words to persuade Teita, but he could not yield, either. Tigre simply shrugged his shoulders and surrendered.

“I got it. You can follow after me, but you will follow my instructions. If it's dangerous, you will run away. Understand?”

Tigre and Teita left the tent after greeting the guard, saying they would walk a little because he could not fall asleep.

--- In a certain sense, I can avoid others with Teita here.

After leaving the area, Tigre looked at Teita who walked next to him. She looked back at him in bewilderment.

“Ah, never mind. Let's go.”

Under the clear skies, Tigre gripped the bow in his left hand and walked with arrows in his right. Though they were still in a safe area, they may be attacked by wild animals.

In contrast to Tigre, who remained silent to feel the intent of the bow, Teita began to speak about what had been happening. He was surprised to hear she was on good terms with Ellen.

“Really, she does not hold back at all. It is useless telling her to do anything.”

“Well, that's just how Ellen is toward others.”

Her lack of reserve, her broad mindedness, and her generosity were her strong points. It was bad that she had trouble being business -like, but Tigre felt that part of her was lovable.

Furthermore, he heard Ellen came to visit him while he was resting. Tigre smiled, which made Teita look on in disappointment, but he persuaded her that he was simply glad to have visitors.

Teita also spoke of the Brune soldiers and Zhcted soldiers visiting him. This was unexpected and made Tigre glad.

--- *How far should I walk...?*

A half koku had already passed and they were on a vast stretch of grass. Tigre had continued on with a sense of unease, but he would worry Teita if he began to complain.

The wind blew, and the surroundings darkened suddenly.

--- *Clouds...?*

Tigre looked to the sky, then looked behind him.

“... Tigre-sama?”

Teita looked at him dubiously. Surprise then floated to her hazelnut eyes.

A deep, black, stone building rose up before the two. It was an old shrine, ruins from centuries past. It had blocked the sunlight.

Tigre and Teita stared at it blankly.

They had walked here in a prairie during the daytime. They should not have missed it, yet it appeared suddenly

.

Teita firmly gripped Tigre's sleeves, her small hands trembling in fear. Tigre took her hand gently in his to ease her tension.

--- The bow is showing me the way.

The temple wall was dirty with soot, long cracks ran here and there. It had long since been abandoned.

“Wha, what kind of deity is worshiped in this shrine...”

Though Teita's voice trembled, Tigre noticed some interest in it. Since she trained as a shrine maiden, she knew it was a temple at a glance; she was looking about in curiosity.

Tigre also looked at the temple. The two found an entrance at the same time.

--- Could there be people here?

“... Do you intend to enter, Tigre-sama?”

Teita's voice was clearly trembling. It was such a mysterious temple after all. Tigre hesitated before turning around.

“I will go, Teita.”

Though there might be danger, it was best to leave her here for the moment, yet she was worried for Tigre. She drew close to Tigre, as if saying she could protect herself.

They entered the building into a dark passage which stretched onward. They moved step by step along the dimly illuminated hall. Various murals were reflected on the walls.

While encouraged by the light, the two walked down the passage in silence. There was only a single path.

When she looked up at the wall, Teita took a deep breath, having understood something from the paintings.

On the wall were carvings of a Goddess. Tigre was only familiar with the Goddess of Storms, Eris. That was the limit of his knowledge.

“This is...”

Teita spoke with a trembling voice.

“Tir na Fa.”

In both Brune and Zhcted, including Perkunas, the King of Gods, there was a Pantheon of ten Gods worshiped. If one went to the frontier, it would be possible to find natives who worshiped more deities.

For those who took an active role in religion, it was clear the altar that lay deeper inside was used to worship these ten Gods.

Amongst them was the Goddess Tir na Fa. As King Perkunas was the God of the sun and light, Tir na Fa was the Goddess of the night, darkness, and death.

She was the wife of Perkunas, his older sister, his younger sister, and his arch-nemesis in the cycle of life.

As the only deity hostile toward Perkunas, why was she included amongst the pantheon of Ten Gods? This discussion had been exchanged between shamans and priests hundreds, thousands of times.

However, by their very natures, she was one of the few Goddesses.

--- So this is a temple for Tir na Fa...

He could not hide his surprise as he looked at the black bow in his left hand.

He had heard a voice during that battle; perhaps it was the Goddess' voice which gave him power rivaling Ellen's Dragon^{Veda}ic Skill.

The black bow, a symbol of the night and darkness.

--- But I've never heard a story of Tir na Fa from Father.

When he succeeded his father's position, he looked through the records of his grandfather and great grandfather, yet he had not heard anything about the Goddess.

Tigre looked up at the Goddess carved into the wall. There were many designs, such as wings.

He touched Teita's shoulder to settle her fright. Tigre put his arrow away and held his bow in both hands, as if dedicating it to the Goddess.

In that moment, the area became dim. Tigre looked back toward Teita and took a deep breath.

Teita, who walked gingerly and had timid expressions looked at Tigre with an ecstatic smile; her eyes were unfocused.

“Teita...?”

[--- It is useless, even if you call out to her.]

While Teita's mouth was moving, the voice did not come from her. The voice was heard directly in Tigre's mind.

Tigre shook his head and looked intently at Teita. There was no one else around.

--- I remember this feeling. It's the same as when I shot down the Wy^{Vyfal}vern...

It was different from the noise of the battlefield at the time; the words sounded directly in his head, but there was something much more important than that at the moment.

“... I do not know who you are, but leave Teita's body.”

[It is difficult to speak otherwise. I shall... remain here.]

Though he could not read it entirely, he felt a somewhat friendly tone in the [Voice]. After glaring at Teita, Tigre released the tension in his body and sighed deeply. He did not know what to do.

“Teita... is safe?”

[Yes. I am using her to speak now, but she will not remember.]

There was neither hostility nor malice from her voice. He would believe her for the time being.

“Are you Tir na Fa?”

He glanced at the Goddess carved in the wall. Tigre asked carefully thinking it could be otherwise. He did not feel a majestic dignity that he would expect from a God.

The [Voice] seemed to have laughed, like she was having fun. It was a kind voice.

[I wonder. I did lead you here, after all.]

Tigre frowned. He was led by his bow because it desired something... But there was much he did not know.

If he assumed this voice was Tir na Fa, then why did it lend its power to him? Why did this bow resonate with the Dragon^{Vifalt}ic Tool? Who amongst his ancestors wielded this weapon?

Many doubts floated to his head. Tigre was almost confused, but he knew his thoughts were straying. The voice laughed, as if amused.

[You're interesting, just like that child.]

“That child?”

[The child to whom I gave this bow.]

Though a hunter, Tigre's ancestor had distinguished military services and received the title of Earl. She said he was similar to that person; it gave Tigre a strange feeling.

[Do you desire power?]

It was asked abruptly. It was a voice unlike any other. A sweet sound crowded Tigre's ear, giving him a stimulation as if his clothes were melting.

[You wanted power, so you came here. Am I right?]

His heart jumped. He grasped his chest with his fingers, his breathing was painful, his articulation poor.

--- *That's right... I wanted it and the bow reacted.*

To fight Roland. To help Ellen.

“... If I asked for power, would you grant me that knowledge?”

Tigre asked carefully, but the response exceeded his expectations.

[You want it.]

She spoke both into his mind and with Teita's voice whose body was now wrapped in a blue light.

[Shoot this child.]

“... What was that?”

[Do not move away. Draw your bow and shoot this child.]

It was not a question.

[Show it to me. Your desire, your resolution, your capability. Master the bow, accept it. Once you have done that, I will grant you the power you desire.]

It spoke lightly, as if singing. If he began shouting, his wound would hurt. Tigre spoke other words first.

“... If I were to shoot, what of Teita? Can you return her to me?”

[I wonder.]

The voice was clearly enjoying the situation. He clenched his teeth. Sweat ran down his face. His eyes hurt. If it would come to this, he should have left.

She was telling him to move the hands he would use to protect.

Teita stood unchanged, her expression remained vacant.

--- ... *Calm down. Think. What can I do?*

[What will you do? You wanted power, correct? So you could protect what was important to you.]

His mind was read. After he entered the temple, he had not spoken his reason for desiring power.

Tigre suppressed his irritation as he thought. Teita had been taken hostage; he could not run away.

--- A while ago, she said to master the bow, to show my desire, resolution, and capability.

Could he sacrifice something important to him for power? Tigre questioned himself.

Suddenly, Tigre remembered his conversation with the voice a while ago.

“... For a while now, you've been pretty talkative.”

[Is there something wrong with that?]

“That time before, why did you not say anything?”

In his fight with Ludmira, he had destroyed the castle gate.

The [Voice] had not answered him. Tigre found some confidence with this knowledge.

The [Voice] was not from his bow.

--- Very well. I will show you.

Tigre nocked his bow.

[Will you do it?]

He drew his bowstring to its limit in response. The wounds of his body screamed in pain, but he endured and ignored it. He prayed to the bow like he did in the snow covered mountain.

In that moment, a cold sensation ran through his hand gripping the bow; his body was attacked by a languid feeling, as if his life, his arms, his legs, as if all were withering.

Tigre firmly stepped on the floor; he did not relax his grip on the bowstring. He continued to send his will to his black bow.

The arrow in his right hand was tinged with a black light.

--- *More. I want more.*

His body was coated in sweat, his eyesight was blurry, and his aim was shaky. Still, Tigre continued to call to his bow, *Give me more power.*

In accordance to his wish, the jet black light engulfed his arrow, pressing upon him to shoot. His arm trembled, *Not yet. It's still not enough.*

[Hmm.]

The [Voice] was apparently aware of Tigre's intent.

[Can you do this? If your adjustment is even a little off, this girl will be blown to pieces. Not even a fragment of her bones will remain.]

You're noisy. Stay quiet.

[And what of your body?]

I know. My injury hurts. I know my body is covered in both sweat and blood now.

--- *Teita. I will shoot you.*

But I will not let you die. I won't let something this strange take you away.

To defend, to save. While aware of the contradiction, he shot.

Letting out a yell, he released his right hand.

A torrent of power was released toward the girl. Tigre opened his eyes widely to look at the arrow he himself had shot.

It was a force equivalent to the life he poured into it. It was an arrow clad in it.

The arrow entered Teita's chest. It stuck there. The sound of air exploded as a gale raged through the narrow hall. The black light, the [Power] blew Teita's clothes to pieces.

Tigre's heart stopped after seeing this.

However, the black light did not injure her and disappeared. Tigre was completely worn out and sat down, his physical strength now drained. Even in battle, he had never felt this tired. He wanted to fall to the floor and sleep.

[You're immature – but your desire for everything, your feelings, barely pass.]

Tigre put enough energy into his shot but was unable to bear it. He had used his life as compensation. However, the shot did not reach Teita.

Until the moment it reached her, he maintained its shape.

--- I don't think I could do that again...

He had managed to measure the flow of [Power] going from his body to the bow and arrow. He could think of no other way. It was a reckless bet for Teita's life.

Teita had not changed. She was clad in a blue light. As if she had lost all strength, her body fell like a puppet with its strings cut. Though Tigre could not stand up, his body moved automatically.

Immediately before Teita hit the floor, he caught her in his arms. The pale light engulfing her disappeared.

Tigre was finally conscious that Teita was now topless. Though he intended to place his mantle on her, he was at the limit of his strength.

--- Thank goodness, really...

Teita's weight and warmth were normal. When he let his tension go, he heard the voice again.

[Now, about this power---]

Compared to before, the voice had a cold tranquility.

[Take care. If you make a mistake, things worse than this may happen.]

The moment the voice finished speaking, an image floated in Tigre's mind.

It was scenery he had never seen before, in a large city that even the King's Capital Nice could not approach. One man shot an arrow from far away. He used a black bow.

The next moment, it was wrapped in a white light, blown away without a trace.

--- *What...?*

For a while, he did not understand what had happened because the scene unfolded too quickly. The face of the man, his clothes, he did not catch anything.

[It happened long ago. You, too, may be able to do something, should you be so inclined. The archer lost his life the moment he shot the arrow.]

“... What the hell is this bow?”

No answer was returned, only a joyful laughter.

[Investigate it if you wish to know. Though many things were lost to time, there are still many clues left in this world.]

It seems it was not willing to tell him. Though Tigre started voicing his questions, before he could speak, the surroundings collapsed. No, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say it disappeared. The walls of stone turned to sand and dust and disappeared in the air.

[You should choose a more appropriate time and place . Yes, for example, deep in the darkness of night atop a mountain of corpses. I look forward to the day you make this bow yours.]

Tigre held Teita tightly to defend her. He understood the voice had disappeared.

Suddenly, a feeble ray of sunlight poured down on them.

Tigre held his bow in one hand and tightly embraced Teita in the other. He sat down in the center of the desolate prairie.

He looked around at his surroundings. The temple was nowhere to be found. The temple of darkness, its shadow and shape, disappeared before he could even count to ten.

“... What was that?”

It was a situation far beyond his imagination. Tigre collapsed, feeling as though he had seen a dream.

--- Was that really the Goddess?

He had imagined a God would have a solemn atmosphere, and he had not felt what he perceived as divinity. A God's voice is gracious; would he not be forced to prostrate in that occasion?

It was like a ghost or a fairy, just out of a childrens story.

“But...”

Tigre looked to the sky while thinking. His attention was focused nowhere.

It said to [Make the bow his].

If he took those words at face value, he had yet to master his weapon.

Nothing ran to him from his black bow. Speaking frankly, it had become silent.

“Looking forward to it, is it...”

He paraphrased the Goddess' words. He could look at it objectively, but he could not understand it with his emotions.

“I guess I just need to do it.”

He was confident he would find more about his bow. Though it was strange, he had grasped an important clue

--- *Really... Who was the ancestor that used this?*

He wondered what kind of blood flowed through him. He was told he was similar to his ancestor. He was anxious.

Suddenly, Teita stirred. She woke up and had a panicked expression. Tigre gently called her name.

“Tigre-sama? Um... Eh?”

She had a sense of incompatibility above her waist. Although Tigre had placed his mantle on her, he decided to apologize and explain what had happened. He bowed with his head to the ground.



"I'm sorry."

"... Tigre-sama?"

"Though it's difficult to explain... I shot an arrow at you."

Teita looked down and noticed her chest was covered by Tigre's mantle. The skin below her chest was exposed.

"You can hit me if you're angry. Though I did my best, it still came to that."

"Please look up."

She spoke calmly. Tigre sat up. Teita was not angry; she somehow understood the situation and faced him with a smile with her eyes shut.

"I am remembering it, little by little... We saw the Goddess Tir na Fa carved into the walls of the temple. When I looked at it, something strange ran through my body... My memories stop here, but---"

She opened her eyes and smiled brightly.

“Tigre-sama, do not apologize. You did your best, so you do not need to apologize. No, please, allow me to thank you.”

Thank you.

Rather than speaking those words, she conveyed her thoughts by hugging Tigre and stroking his head gently.

She eventually released her grip and the two naturally separated.

Tigre grasped his black bow and stood up.

“I have a place I need to go to. Please help me, Teita.”

While there was still distance from the Silver Meteor Army, the Navarre Knights divided into three. The first group consisted of two thousand troops. The remaining had approximately fifteen hundred each.

The first force marched toward the Silver Meteor Army to the south. The second and third made a large detour.

Olivier stood at the head of the first force with a long spear held high. Even against the presence of Roland, he was a distinct person who could lead several thousand Knights with style and dignity.

“Crescent Moon!”

He raised a battle cry. The Knights raised their weapons aloft and ran forward in a horseshoe formation, the earth trembled from their charge.

The Knights of Brune developed [Crescent Moon] several decades ago.

First, the force would divide into three. The first unit would face the enemy while the remaining two would move about the battlefield.

The first force charged forward without arcing to the left or right.

The second force would charge in from the side without pause to prevent any enemies from escaping; however, the enemy still had one side exposed.

Being attacked from two fronts, the enemy would show its back. They would begin their final attack there.

The third force had made a large detour and met them from behind.

The bewildered enemy would change tactics being attacked from behind.

Sandwiched from both sides, the first unit would apply more pressure to the enemy. Being attacked from three fronts, they would collapse. This was [Crescent Moon].

When their cooperation was successful, each unit supported the other and acted as a diversion. Its destructive force was surprising.

Every Knight of Brune had won many battles using this formation.

In the case of the Navarre Knights, the strong presence known as Roland merely added to their victories.

On the other side, the Silver Meteor Army had forty-three hundred troops. Three thousand were in the center with five hundred on each side. Three hundred remained in the rear as reserve. It was a typical lineup. The Brune soldiers were placed in center, encased by soldiers of Zhcted.

Ellen and Sophie stood in preparation for their clash with Roland.

Lim held the command of the troops, with Massas as her Vice-Commander. Viscount Augre remained off the battlefield, tending to the injured and non-combatants.

Lim led all the troops. Everyone thought it was out of consideration of Brune that she had Massas as her adjutant. That is, save for the people concerned.

“Lord Massas. The enemy is advancing.”

Massas nodded and stroked his beard, despite his frown.

“So they're not going after Tigre and the others.”

Ellen had released information that Tigre was injured to direct Roland's attention to herself.

“Their weapons, their lineup. As expected, it's [Crescent Moon]...”

A horn sounded, a bell was struck.

The Navarre Knights ran forward with their spears at the ready toward the Silver Meteor Army; however, the Knights were fewer than expected.

The vanguard of the Silver Meteor Army held large shields and spear in hand in preparation for the powerful offense. They were made of thick wood strengthened by an iron plate. Though heavy, it was sturdy and would endure the Knights' charge.

However, the clash did not occur. The Navarre Knights approached Tigre's army without changing direction. The units to the flank held their spears out horizontally.

They were not heavy javelins like those held by the Navarre Knights. Rather than throwing them, the soldiers held them straight out, forming a fence of spears. Still, the Navarre Knights did not halt and charged straight.

Do not let the enemy take your sides or your back, and do not pursue those that run to the side. Lim had given them strict orders.

Her instructions were proven useful very quickly. If they had chased after the enemy, the main force would easily have their defenses pierced, and they would be crushed as they fell to disorder.

The main enemy unit took its stance. They threw their javelins toward Tigre's army while turning to the right.

“--- Retreat.”

Looking at the enemy from behind, Lim gave the order to the entire army.

The enemy had shown its back and would take time to change directions. Though it was a golden opportunity, they chose to retreat.

Though there was dissatisfaction and doubt, their trust was superior. The Zhcted soldiers simply observed orders and retreated in an orderly manner. Lim and Massas had gone over many previous battles which utilized [Crescent Moon].

“Next is the second force...”

They changed how they would attack seeing their enemy retreat following the [Crescent Moon] formation.

The third force would attack from the right, and the first unit would charge in from the front according to the formation. The second group would crowd in around the left; all three units would surround them.

The Silver Meteor Army backed away, as if it did not have the will to fight until, finally, they had their back to the river.

Olivier, who commanded the Navarre Knights, noticed the unnatural movements of his enemy.

“They can no longer move backward. Could they have a counter-measure against [Crescent Moon]...?”

However, after a quick thought, Olivier decided to continue the formation.

--- Earl Vorn is injured, that must be a fact. The enemy couldn't have recovered from yesterday's defeat, and their will to fight is still low.

Furthermore, the ground was stable from the movements of the first two forces. Even if they had some plan, he could simply overturn it by having the Knights charge.

Above all, [Crescent Moon] had never been broken.

Olivier ordered an attack.

Massas and Lim received a report regarding the Navarre Knights in a calm manner.

“About fifteen hundred... The river is to our back, and the Black Knight is their leader.”

The tension and fear strongly showed in the messenger's face and the face of all who heard the report. Everyone was imprinted with a fear of Roland from yesterday's battle.

“--- He came.”

However, the person who blew their fears away with a single phrase, the silver-white haired Vanadis with a longsword, appeared calm. The surrounding soldiers regained their normal tension.

“Lord Eleanora. Lord Sophia.”

Massas saluted Ellen and Sophie as dictated by propriety.

“Though I feel terrible for doing this, I will entrust that task to you.”

“Leave it to us.”

The difficult task of defeating Roland – Ellen took it with a light tone in her voice. Sophie also nodded and smiled gently in a manner unbecoming of war.

Soon, another report of the enemy was delivered.

“... So it's time. They're provoking us by keeping with [Crescent Moon].”

Massas muttered to himself bitterly.

The surface of the river reflected the winter sun. The Navarre Knights approached the Silver Meteor Army. The sky was covered in a rain of arrows and javelins from the Zhcted Army. The atmosphere was torn, soldiers and Knights fell to arrow and spear. Despite the damage, neither side crumbled.

Then, from the right, the Knights of Navarre attacked the Silver Meteor Army.

The third force attacked from the right. Roland wielding Durandal took the lead and tore through the Zhcted soldiers, mowing them down as he rushed forward. The Zhcted soldiers could offer no resistance and were knocked down like dolls into the mud.

The Navarre Knights broke through the right wing of the Silver Meteor Army.

However, their movements dulled as they approached the central force. The same happened to the troops at the front.

The horses neighed, and their movements stopped.

The Knights finally noticed. The mud beneath their feet was substantial.

Hundreds of arrows from the right and left headed toward the Knights. Humans and horses collapsed, one after another, thrown to the mud. Though they blocked with their shields, they could not advance or retreat unless they dismounted.

“What is the meaning of this? I heard nothing of this from the scouts.”

Olivier bit his lip. It was not that his scouts brought back insufficient information. They had confirmed the ground's stability with their prior movements.

So why was it muddy only in this area?

“... It's going to plan so far.”

Within the Silver Meteor Army, Ellen muttered to herself.

What they did was not too difficult. Viscount Augre had dammed up the river with sandbags during their fight with Marquis Greast. With the sand bags in hand, it was easy enough to think of the plan.

The water would not overflow in winter under normal circumstances.

But with the rain from yesterday, the water levels were higher, changing the surrounding earth to mud in a very short time. It was unreasonable for the Navarre Knights to discover this information since the land was flooded just prior to battle.

In contrast to yesterday, the Zhcted soldiers attacked the Navarre Knights in a one-sided manner. The blood mixed with the muddy water. Human and horse corpses sunk to the ground and piled up.

The Knights desperately defended or took measures to escape from the mud as the Zhcted Army charged with their spears forward. The soldiers took revenge for their defeat and attacked to their heart's content.

The Knights of Navarre were pushed back, cut down, and seemed to fall in defeat, but there was one corner of the Zhcted Army which was being pressured.

Roland had thrown his horse aside and ran through the mud, cutting through soldiers along the way.

That space was a reproduction of yesterday's atrocity.

Whenever the Black Knight swung his sword, screams and blood flew, and the lives of one or two soldiers were lost. For every step they took forward, they were forced to take two back. He crushed their armor and reaped their lives mercilessly.

On a path made of blood and dirt, Roland rushed forward with an unexpected speed as he wielded his sword. He reaped the lives of horse and human, as if he were brandishing a large scythe.

Countless corpses littered the grass, blood and mud mixed and flowed like sewage. The one to stop Roland's rush was the same as yesterday.

With sword in hand and her silver-white hair fluttering in the wind, she struck out at the sacred blade in Roland's hand.

“We meet again.”

A fearless smile was on Ellen's mouth as she stood before him. Sophie soon appeared behind her.

“So it's you... Where is Earl Vorn?”

“He's a bit busy. The
[Wind Princess of the Silver Flash] will be your opponent
.”

With a movement of Sophie's hand, Ellen rushed forward. The sunlight reflected her sword as she collided with the sacred blade. Roland let out a strong desire to kill, but Ellen simply returned it without showing any signs of pressure.

Blue sparks were thrown about, the wind swirled, and mud splashed about.

Roland took a deep breath from her combination attack, a light appearing in his two eyes.

--- She's stronger than yesterday...!

Her determination and resolution was transmitted through their swords, and her ability had clearly increased along with her spirit. Roland could not foresee an easy fight.

Just from the wind stroking his skin, he knew he would meet his death if he let up even slightly.

They collided as they fought. Even in the confusion of the battle, a small circle surrounded them.

The subordinates separated from the mortal battle in fear.

There were some brave Knights from Navarre who entered the space, but they were immediately knocked away by Sophie. The Zhcted soldiers who approached were also repelled.

While Ellen and Roland clashed, the vortex of battle grew, little by little.

Roland separated himself from the battlefield, knowing full well he should not turn his back to the Vanadis, so he entrusted the war front to Olivier.

Leaving the world where iron, blood, and dirt reigned, the Black Knight and the Vanadis sped along a prairie to an area two belsta (approximately two kilometers) from the battlefield. Sophie followed shortly after Ellen on horseback.

“Black Knight. I would be pleased if you would allow me to be your opponent as well.”

Ellen quickly glanced at her to ask if it was fine. The Vanadis of the Light Flower softly returned a nod.

Ellen chose to fight in this location alone for two reasons.

The first was to show her determination to Roland.

The second was out of consideration for Sophie's physical strength. Though Sophie had strength, her endurance lacked in comparison to Ellen or Ludmira. It was clear since she was not fighting Roland from the start.

“--- Come.”

Roland's answer was short. The three shadows shortened their distance.

The longsword and bishop staff drew a large arc. Even with the two of them, even when Ellen and Sophie fought together, they were only evenly matched against Roland. They received attacks, dodged them, and attacked in return.

Ellen and the others could not possibly imitate Roland's actions. If she took the attacks head on, her arms would be broken.

However, Roland did not have luxury when fighting the two warriors at the same time. He could not blink in the slightest, nor could he allow disturbances in his breathing.

In a frightful exchange, Roland's large sword caught Ellen's horse. She lost her horse once again.

However, the following action was different from yesterday.

--- Black Knight. I will show you why I am a Vanadis.

“--- Shadow ^{Verni}Wind.”

As she moved her legs from the horse, Ellen kicked off the saddle as if dancing in the air. Her silver-white hair fluttered in the wind as she cut down at Roland from above. Roland turned his entire body to meet her blade.

However, Ellen was not thrown to the ground. Her posture straightened in the air. At the speed of a bird gliding in to attack its prey, she cut down at Roland with motions impossible for a human.

“Yet another petty trick!”

The atmosphere visibly swirled. The sound of steel, tones of high and low, mixed into the air. Ellen used the wind to jump about and attacked Roland from his blind spot.

Gusts of wind stirred the ground with every blow. While Ellen attacked as she danced about in the air, Roland was forced into a defensive battle. Though Ellen cut Roland's horse down, the Black Knight landed without a single opening.

Ellen's vigorous attack continued. Her speed was good, and it was impossible to read her movements which were like the wind. If he were a normal man, he would have died long ago.

However, Roland had caught sight of Ellen's movements. He followed her in the air with his eyes by reading the flow of air against his skin. He used his reflexes to wield his blade.

He let loose a roar. As if cutting through a storm, his blade met Arifal. Ellen was blown away.

Though Ellen took her stance to meet Roland's attack, Sophie made her move there, the sound of her bishop staff echoing through the air.

Ellen had used [Shadow ^{Verni} Wind] in battle. Sophie watched the two fight as she quietly waited for a chance.

“Lustrous Flow, ^{Muteirasv} Rush Before Me.”

Particles of light were emitted toward Roland from her bishop staff. It did not emit heat, nor did it cause pain, but it was enough to create an opening.

Ellen brandished her sword high in the air. Arifal responded to her call. It tinged with a pale blue light; a blood-colored wind wrapped about the blade, shaking the very air.

--- This man is a human, but he has a power and technique beyond human. Even so, he is not a Vanadis.

He was not a normal human; his strength and skill were abnormal. Roland's weapon had the ability to negate her Dragon^{Veda}ic Skill, so it was fine.

She was still conflicted, but seeing Tigre's face as he slept, and with Sophie supporting her, Ellen's resolution was hardened.

--- Sasha, you might be angry. Even before such an enemy who could overwhelm you like this man could, you would fight and die bravely.

However, Ellen was determined. She would use this power for her desire. Her feelings were not lacking in this attack at all.

--- I will destroy that sword!

Ley Admos
“Cleave the Wind!”

She swung her longsword downward. A condensed storm raged from the tip of her blade, unleashing a roar similar to a beast's. The invisible fangs of wind pierced the ground, scattering earth and sand. She used her Dragonic Skill against Roland – to be precise, she was forced to. She had no room for error.

Roland raised his eyebrow slightly, though no sign of agitation was present. He attacked the wind with Durandal, staring at it with the eyes of a beast.

Letting loose a cry, he cut it down.

The atmosphere shook with the sound of an explosion. The wind mercilessly blew the earth away as Durandal pushed the supernatural wind away. Roland was forced to retreat, his jet-black armor rattling as it took the force of the violent shock wave.

Once the wind calmed down, Roland stood proudly. His black hair was disordered, and his hands and feet were numb. Even so, he stood gazing at Ellen who had finally landed.

“What a frightening power. No... more than that, it was stunning.”

He gripped the sacred sword in hand once again and took his stance.

“But – you cannot defeat me.”

Though the two Vanadis glared at Roland, they could no longer hide their ^{Veda} Dragonic Skill.

The three suddenly heard the sound of the wind being torn as something flew to them.

It was an arrow. Roland casually hit it down and looked in admiration toward the one who fired it.

“--- To think he could fire from that distance.”

One shadow approached them.

He had dull red hair and wore hempen clothes, a black bow and quiver lay at his waist.

It was Tigrevurmud Vorn.

“... Tigre.”

Ellen stared in blank surprise as the young man approached. She was happy because he was alive rather than because he had come to help. He had woken up and somehow made it to their side; however, words of abuse came gushing forth.

“Why did you come here, idiot!”

“I'm not an idiot, Ellen.”

Though Sophie also scolded him, she looked at Tigre with a sense of relief drifting through the anger.

“--- Vanadis.”

Roland spoke with a heavy voice.

“Allow us some time. I have business with the Earl.”

After they had returned, Teita brought a horse for Tigre and made preparations for him to go to battle.

Of course, she begged Tigre desperately, but she knew it was useless.

In the end, Teita gave way.

His wound had little time to heal, and it would barely stay clothed, even if he wore heavier clothes, more bandages, and his leather armor.

“Tigre-sama. Please return safely.”

“Yeah. I'm off.”

After reading the letter from Sophie, he learned how she and Ellen would fight against Roland. After that, Tigre single-mindedly aimed for the battlefield.

Though both enemy and ally were surprised to see a lone horseman with a bow, Lim understood immediately that it was Tigre that approached.

While apologizing to Lim and Massas, Tigre heard where Ellen and Sophie had run off to and rushed there on horseback.

If this were not a battlefield, the two would likely scold him for a long time. Massas had thought to tie up Tigre until the battle ended, but with the appeal of the young, red-haired man who was his close friend's son and words from Lim, he reluctantly let him go.

When he attacked the Black Knight with his bow, the battle between the Navarre Knights and the Silver Meteor Army approached its conclusion.

Both the first and third units from the Knights were almost driven to annihilation. The second unit rushed to their rescue, but, due to the mud, their mobility could not be utilized.

Their Commander, Olivier, had ordered them to fall back, but he could not move. The corpses of horses lay on the ground. His men protected themselves from the rain of arrows with shields. They slowly struggled as they crawled through the mud. Somehow, they managed to break away.

However, even if they escaped from the enemy, the five thousand Knights had been reduced to three thousand. It was a crushing defeat.

In the headquarters of the Silver Meteor Army, Lim gave a short compliment to Massas.

“Well done. By the way... How did you learn of their formation?”

“I am 55 this year.”

Massas answered Lim's question in that manner.

“If you have lived for that long, many things that you see and hear stay in your head. That is all it was. If anything, you are far more amazing, Limlisha.”

Lim tilted her head slightly within her helmet after hearing the sudden praise.

“You made a plan for victory. You arranged a large army and have a sense of how to move them properly. At the young age of 19, you were able to use them effectively. When I was 19, I was still a boy absorbed in thinking of the future with his father.”

“Divination, was it?”

“So you heard from Tigre. That boy...”

“Though unexpected, you do not seem ashamed of your hobby.”

Massas made a grumpy face and violently pulled on his beard. Lim nodded. The conversation in the room was afforded to the Silver Meteor Army.

“... That Tigre. He better return safely. I have a thing or two to say about his selfishness. I won't stop until he swears not to do it again.”

“Very well. Please allow me to help by all means. He has been unreasonable every day since I have met him.”

The two had only a single wish, that Tigre would return safely.

Tigre got off his horse and stood in the grass distant from the battlefield and faced Roland. Though Ellen, alongside Sophie, stood behind Tigre, she was quietly abusing him in her mind.

“Honestly, what a foolish man... The General is supposed to stay in the back.”

“My, my. Ellen, you seem quite happy.”

She read Ellen's thoughts and spoke in her gentle voice as usual.

“After all, what could you say before his dignified back? I am quite curious as to what Lim would say at this moment.”

Ellen averted her eyes from Sophie and looked at Tigre from behind. From what she saw before, Tigre's complexion was poor, and sweat blotted his face. He should not have been wearing leather, either. It was easy to tell the condition of his body.

Even so, Tigre resolutely confronted the Black Knight.

“Earl Vorn!”

Roland shouted.

“You brought the Zhcted Army into our country to defend your territory. Is this true?”

“That's right.”

Tigre answered and continued looking at Roland.

“No matter what information you find, you will see no signs that the Zhcted Army has pillaged or looted the land of others. I hired them purely to defend the peace of Alsace.”

“I know, but one day, they will become an invader! They will one day bring war. They will attack the towns and villages. What will you do then?”

Tigre again responded without hesitation.

“To defend the citizens of Brune, I would fight any and all invaders.”

Roland looked at his eyes. Even if he was lying, he had done so before two Vanadis of Zhcted. His words came

from neither his desire to protect his people nor his faith in his comrades from Zhcted. The source behind his conviction was unknown.

“If you doubt Tigre's words, why not come with us?”

Ellen smiled and laughed with a haughty attitude.

“Our purpose is Duke Thenardier. We will punish him for his sins. In return, you can have his lands to the northeast. How about it?”

Roland did not show it on his face, but he was smiling. If he could, he would laugh.

“I cannot accept your invitation. Such things will not move us; that is common knowledge to a Knight. We wield our sword for the peace of our country's people. Duke Thenardier does not have the authority to move the Knights of Navarre for his petty revenge. However... we cannot overlook a traitor, either.”

As he said that, he quietly grasped Durandal.

“Before we fight, there is one thing I wish to show you.”

Tigre grasped his black bow and nocked an arrow. An intense pressure attacked his body. His muscles screamed, his wound pained him intensely, his blood seeped through his clothing. At the same time, a black light was emitted from the arrow. It was an unnatural power which disturbed even the atmosphere.

Sophie opened her eyes wide in surprise. Though Ellen was surprised as well, it was different from Sophie's.

He shot his arrow at the ground a few steps to the right of Roland. The earth was tremulous, a cloud of dust was blown away by the wind, an irregular distortion tore through the ground.

Without a doubt, the arrow displayed the same destructive atmosphere as when she had previously called out [Cleave the Wind].
Ley Admos

“Even you can use such magic.”

Roland expressed his thoughts. While enduring his pain, Tigre stared at the Black Knight.

“Will you not retreat?”

“Is that a threat?”

“Yes.”

“... I understand.”

Roland affixed his left hand to the blade held in his right. He held Durandal high above. At that time, Ellen noticed, whether it was yesterday or today, Roland had never held it with both hands. Even when he blocked her ^{Veda} Dragonic Skill, he had used one hand alone.

“I will also respond in full force.”

Tigre took a deep breath. When he saw Ellen and Sophie's face, he could see their fatigue. Even the two Vanadis were not a match for Brune's strongest Knight.

If they could not defeat him here, both Tigre and the two Vanadis would die.

Tigre nocked yet another arrow, but he bent over from the pain in his body. A lukewarm mass flowed through his throat. A red liquid leaked from his clenched teeth before he fell to the ground kneeling.

His vision shook, his consciousness wavered. His whole body appealed for rest to avoid the crisis of it failing.

He was wounded and tired. It was unreasonable for him to fight.

--- *Even so.*

He could not afford to retire here. Roland did not relax his stance. He had to defeat him to move forward and protect his people.

Tigre nocked his arrow again. Suddenly, he felt something against his neck. He turned back to see Ellen and Sophie standing there.

Ellen looked at Tigre angrily. Though her expression was more complex than that, there was clearly anger. Sophie as well looked at him sternly with reproach.

“I’ve told you many times already. You’re mine. Don’t go dying without my permission.”

Ellen and Sophie supported Tigre, their hands against his back.

“Please. I feel bad for Ellen. Won't you listen to her?”

In such a state, the two Vanadis readied their weapons , showing their will to fight, as if to show their desire to defend Tigre.

Tigre hesitated for a moment before looking at Roland.

The Black Knight nodded slightly. Still, it was powerful.

Tigre readied his heart and aimed his arrow toward Roland, drawing the bowstring to its limit.

Ellen's Silver Flash and Sophie's Light Flower tinged with a pale light.

Innumerable particles of light spilled from Light Flower, an eddy of wind flowed and gathered at Tigre's arrowhead which shined gold.



俺はあなたに勝つ！
俺の民を守るために！

「シルヴィーディオ
銀の流星軍」総大将ニティグル

フリーユス最強の「黒騎士」ヒロシマン
撃つてこー！

The atmosphere raged in response to the massive power; a storm blew the area surrounding the four.

Tigre planted his feet firmly. A light blue wind and particles of light spiraled about his arrow; the ripples quietly expanded.

The shock wave of the power flowing from the bow and arrow shook the ground. The atmosphere distorted around them, forcing Ellen and Sophie to bend backward

.

“... I can think of nothing to say.”

Amazement dyed Sophie's beryl eyes as she spoke. Ellen smiled proudly as she pressed her silver-white hair down with her hand.

“He's good, right? But I won't give him to you.”

Roland, at the other end of the arrow, felt an extraordinary force. Compared to the Dragon^{Veda}ic Skill Ellen and Sophie used – Roland recognized it as some form of witchcraft – the arrow before him was far more powerful; he let out an involuntary groan.

--- No. In the first place, this is fundamentally different from the attack made by the Vanadis.

Roland's intuition felt there was a difference between this attack and the Dragonic Skill, but he knew nothing more than that. He was a Knight, he did not understand such things.

Roland stopped thinking. The bowstring was already bent, and his sword was at the ready. He ground his foot into the ground and took a deep breath.

“--- Come!”

The arrow was ready; a storm blew against his body. Roland heard a loud voice through the roars of the wind.

“I will defeat you! I will defend my people!”

The arrow was shot and met. The shock caused a numbness in Tigre's right hand, the fierce winds thrashed his entire body, yet he did not break his stance for a moment.

A trail of dazzling blue and gold light followed the arrow as it traveled forward. Even with the violent movement of the sand and the earth beneath it, Roland did not remove his eyes from the arrow.

He accurately captured its path and moved his blade.

They clashed.

There was a sound, as if a mountain was blown away; the earth intensely shook. He had impressively met the arrowhead with Durandal; however, the arrow was not cut, rather, it remained in the air, as if trying to pierce through his sword.

It was a strange spectacle. One arrow rivaled Brune's strongest Knight, even when he grasped his blade with two hands. Eventually, the light of the arrow began to fade.

Roland clenched his teeth and devoted the remaining muscles in his body to the task of destroying the arrow. Although his eyes and ears were entirely fixed on the clash, he had felt it with his entire body through the sacred sword. There was no disorder in either the arrow or blade.

--- I... I am the Knight named Roland, I will complete my task as sworn by the blade bestowed upon me by His Majesty!

While those thoughts ran through his mind, Roland recalled the words Tigre shouted a moment ago.

I will defend my people.

Who else would run through the battlefield, shedding his blood and risking his life, to defend his people?

Tigrevurmud Vorn was a traitor. But who made him rebel?

--- This blade... I received this sword from His Majesty to defend our people...!

“Ooh!”

Roland let out a roar, letting out all that had accumulated within him.

He crushed the arrow and pierced the ground with the sacred sword.

There was a flash of light. The ground shook. Roland's sword stood erect. Cracks appeared, gouging through the earth at a tremendous speed, reaching Tigre's feet. The shock shook Tigre's hair.

The reverberations beneath the two and the Vanadis gradually diminished. The Vanadis gazed at the two.

The arrow was shattered; Roland was still alive.

“... This is my defeat.”

Roland spoke those words before Tigre. As for Tigre, he could not understand.

During the clash, numerous cracks appeared in Roland's black armor. His gauntlet and leg guards shattered and his hair was in disorder. Roland's entire body was covered in sweat. He tightly grasped the sacred sword in both hands as it stood planted in the ground.

When his eyes met Tigre's, Roland spoke hoarsely.

“I can't move my arms. Though, it does not seem as if they are broken.”

It was a first for him. Roland looked puzzled.

It was not a lie that his arms were unable to move. His fingers were stiff and would not separate from the sword . If Roland still had the will to fight, he would have dragged his sword and cut Tigre down.

“Above all, I cannot defeat you at the moment.”

It was Roland himself who felt he had lost the most.

Roland's body had met the demand of its owner. It had summoned a force far beyond its limit, and was exhausted. However, the spirit supporting his body was not something he could let go so easily.

“--- I surrender.”

The moment the Black Knight spoke those words, Tigre staggered and fell.

The cold winter air stroked Tigre's face as he opened his eyes.

“You're awake?”

Along with a gentle voice, Ellen's face came into view against the backdrop of the blue sky. Tigre noticed his head was on something warm and soft.

While he was out of it, Ellen had let him use her legs as a pillow to sleep. Tigre tried to get up on reflex, but Ellen placed her hands on his chest.

“Rest. Your battle has ended.”

Though he could not tell how the battle was going, Ellen did not believe her army would be defeated. Roland had also acknowledged his defeat.

He was heading to the Knights to end the battle.

Looking to the left and right, he saw Sophie's figure standing with her normal smile as she looked at him. Noticing Tigre's gaze, she spoke joyfully.

“You do not need to think too hard, Lord Tigrevurmud. If you wish for me to take her place, I will do so immediately.”



“Stop saying nonsense, Sophie.”

She threatened her with a menacing expression. Ellen looked at Tigre's face while exuding her crabby mood.

“Really. What should I do with you? I have never met such an idiotic person. If you want, I could take your neck right now. Do you really want to die that much?”

“No words of praise, huh?”

“Fool.”

Ellen's hand made to hit Tigre, but she stopped early and pressed it against him.

He could feel her warmth through the palm of her hand and her words. Tigre stopped moving, a mix of the fragrance of grass, his sweat, and another sweet scent tickled his nose.

“... Such a nice scent.”

Though he did not point out what he was talking about, it seems Ellen understood what he meant. Her face was dyed red and she muttered to herself. Tigre as

well, though he had not particularly given thought to his comment, became flushed after seeing Ellen's reaction.

As his gaze wandered restlessly, Tigre thought frantically about what happened before he fell into unconsciousness.

“Um, since when...?”

“This? A minute ago.”

Ellen lightly hit her thigh as she looked away. She must have done so right as Tigre woke up.

Her thighs and palms were comfortable, but, above all, Tigre was glad to accept her good will. He stopped trying to sit up and looked to the sky.

“Thank you.”

“What, don't worry about it. Sophie and I have already forgiven you. As for Lim and Massas, I'm sure we can clear that up.”

Finally regaining her composure, she lightly played with Tigre's hair with her finger as she smiled. Imagining what the two would say and thinking of Tigre bowing

his head to the ground, they began to laugh. Sophie, too, laughed as she thought about the scene.

Gently, a quiet breeze blew by the three people.

When Roland reported that he was surrendering, the Knights had trouble believing it.

However, the Silver Meteor Army stopped attacking. When they saw the Knights retreat, they did not pursue. Of course, many were relieved it was finally the end.

“We came with five thousand... Nearly half have been lost.”

With a worn out expression, Olivier muttered so no one could hear him. What surprised him the most, though, was Roland's appearance when he returned.

His black hair was a mess, his face clearly showed his fatigue, and his jet black armor, his very symbol, was in tatters.

“Sorry.”

Roland said just that. Olivier staggered in shock and was quickly supported by the surrounding Knights. He needed their help to remain upright.

“.... What happened?”

Though it was unbelievable that Roland would be defeated, he could see signs of damage from the staff and sword, but none from the arrow. Strangely, his gauntlets and leg guards were almost on the verge of collapse.

“I fought. I was defeated. That is all.”

Those words alone were not enough. Olivier could not possibly consent.

“What is to happen to us?”

“That has yet to be decided.”

The Knights' reactions were divided cleanly into two. Some had not yet accepted their defeat or Roland's declaration of surrender, and there were those who wished for a continuation of battle.

“We have lost two thousand men, and both our Commander and Vice-Commander are still alive! If we ask for reinforcements from the Knights in the area, we can annihilate those rebels!”

Though a young Knight spoke breathlessly, Roland, their leader, simply told them to accept their defeat and apologized.

On the other hand, it did not necessarily mean the Silver Meteor Army was victorious. Their battle had yet to end.

Lim and Ellen, after thinking hard, placed soldiers who were slightly injured or fatigued to the front while the rest were moved to the back due to their worry of a possible deployment during their rest. They had started with forty-three hundred soldiers, but many were lost in the maelstrom of war.

In a situation like this, after their victory was reported, it was impossible for them to move. They could only sit on the spot and rest, even if they were next to corpses or pools of blood. It was difficult to distinguish who was dead and who was alive.

Tigre and Massas finally settled down once they reunited.

Though Massas wanted to complain for more than one koku, when seeing the three exhausted people, he swallowed his words.

Tigre was supported by Ellen and Sophie, but the two Vanadis were also lacking in energy.

With a sense of relief from their victory in battle and, more than anything else, his joy from their safety, he met them and lightly pat them on the back.

Though his wounds hurt, Tigre was also very happy.

Lim also looked to feel the same way. After closely supporting Ellen, she looked down at Tigre coldly.

“... I have quite a bit to say to you. Do you understand?”

If Tigre were as usual, he would notice joy and shyness in her voice, but he could not hear them at the moment, so he obediently nodded.

“You have only brought this upon yourself. Until this is completely finished, you are forbidden from touching the bow.”

It was punishment. Though he was saddened from the bottom of his heart, he had no intention of opposing her decision.

When day broke, both armies held a meal and began burying the dead. They chose a small hill near the river in Territoire, Augre's territory, to bury both the dead of the Navarre Knights and the Zhcted Army.

Tigre bought large amounts of food from the towns and villages in the vicinity and gave five gold and silver coins to all the soldiers as a reward. Of course, it was ultimately going to be a debt on his part.

“It's quite frightening to think an individual has this much debt.”

Lim approved of Tigre's request, but she did not forget to add it on to what he owed.

She fully understood the necessity. Though they had won, they had sacrificed a lot. To quell the soldier's discontent, such treatment was necessary.

However, they could not procure food as they desired. The villages and towns gave priority to saving food more than money since it was winter.

Still, the soldiers were happy with just some honey added to their fish soup and some wine during their meal.

Finally, both armies prepared for discussion.

Tigre, Ellen, and Massas represented the Silver Meteor Army. Roland and Olivier represented the Navarre Knights.

“What will you do from now on?”

Roland asked that at the start.

“We head for Nemetacum.”

Tigre answered bluntly, though with a rueful expression. Nemetacum was Duke Thenardier's territory, and it was several days distance away.

However, the Silver Meteor Army was considerably damaged in their battle with Navarre. If they were to fight Duke Thenardier further in the future, there was no guarantee they would have enough forces. Tigre and Ellen truly were considering hiring mercenaries.

Regardless, there were no other aristocrats who could reliably become their ally, and if news of the Navarre Knights' defeat was spread, other Knights may appear to subjugate them.

As usual, Tigre had no time.

“I see, Perhaps I can buy you some time.”

Both Tigre and Massas frowned upon hearing Roland's words, while Ellen's red pupils showed interest. Olivier, in the back of his mind, still could not consent.

“I will return to the Royal Capital and get an audience with His Majesty for you.”

“That is unreasonable.”

Massas was the first to react.

“His Majesty... has become weak and cannot do such things.”

He could not possibly say he was playing with blocks.

“Above all, you have lost the battle. Do you think Thenardier and Ganelon will remain silent? They will simply place the blame on you.”

“Besides, how much time would that get us? It is unlikely to happen, and there is no knowing when other Knighthoods and aristocrats will make a move against us.”

Ellen folded her arms and asked Roland. Tigre also showed he disagreed.

“You also went to the Royal Palace for me, Lord Massas, and you were almost killed just for trying to arrange a meeting with His Majesty. The capital is far more dangerous than you think.”

“I already knew it would be dangerous.”

Tigre's words of persuasion seemed to make Roland stiffen.

“As a Knight of Brune, I must correct mistakes.”

Roland pulled Durandal out of its sheath and presented it to Tigre.

Tigre did not understand the meaning and simply looked at Roland.

“I entrust this to you. It is proof that Roland has acknowledged your justice. If you show this to a Knight or a noble, so long as they are not a great fool, they will not fight you.”

Though Roland did not speak of it, the thought of the legendary Knight was ablaze in his mind. He thought of him as a person who fought for the people, so it was no mystery he would present this sword. Those were the feelings in his actions.

“Just to make sure, will the Knights of Navarre not fight with us?”

Though Ellen asked, Olivier refused. He was not as open minded as Roland and spoke in a business-like tone

.

“We must return to our fortress. We cannot leave the border unguarded indefinitely.”

Tigre received the sacred sword and felt a strange feeling in the heavy blade. It was something special like his bow or a Dragon^{Viralt}ic Tool.

Tigre gave it some thought and raised his head and responded to Roland.

“I understand. Until you return, I will remain here.”

Tigre did not decide this only out of sentiment. He also wanted time to increase the number under his command.

Roland took a horse and rode day and night until he reached the King's Capital of Nice. It was possible because of Roland's uncommon physical strength; others would become exhausted on the way.

He took a quick rest and straightened his personal appearance. The next day, Roland visited the palace.

Though Massas was influential for a minor aristocrat, Roland was a separate matter entirely. He had been popular since the day he became a Knight and was assigned to lead the Navarre Knights. Since then, he had been called by the King to visit him at the Royal Palace at least once a year. The guards let him pass through immediately.

Roland walked straight through the Palace.

“Oh? Isn't that Lord Roland? What might you be here for?”

Deep in the palace, Roland was called out to by Duke Ganelon.

Ganelon's back was stooped low. His height was close to that of a boy of ten years, his limbs were like a child's, his small body was wrapped in ornate clothes, and, in place of hair, he wore a silk hat.

His eyelids were large, but his eyes were strangely thin. It was difficult to tell if they were empty or not. It was rumored they were seen fully open only once or twice.

Before Roland's tall stature, he was a dwarf of a man. He was like an eerie, ugly child without any semblance of beauty.

“Due to circumstance, I must meet the King by all means.”

Roland spoke in a blunt tone. He disliked this man.

“I see. It must be important, coming from a great Knight like you.”

Ganelon showed exaggerated surprise. He then spoke with a laugh.

“However, His Majesty is resting in his room right now. I will have someone check how he is right now. You should take a rest in this room until then.”

“Very well. I will do that.”

Roland obediently left. Because of his purpose in coming, he did not wish to alert others. He had no intention of obtaining permission from Ganelon from the start.

Roland called one of the chamberlains to a stop and asked to rest in a guestroom. Hearing his name, the chamberlain prepared an available room immediately.

He was guided to a small room deep in the palace with a bed, desk, and chair. There was little furniture inside. Though he was anxious that it was windowless, Roland decided to accept the room, since he would leave shortly afterward.

--- Though it is disrespectful, I will look for a chance to sneak out.

He entered the room and sat on the chair, vaguely thinking about the future.

--- *There are signs of life.*

There were about ten people beside the door. When Roland stood up, the chair fell over. He rushed to the door and found Ganelon with many soldiers.

He kicked the small door. Despite this, the door remained firm and did not break. It was braced from the outside, likely with an iron plate. At this time, Roland realized he had fallen into a trap.

“How are you feeling, Roland?”

A voice came from above. Roland looked at the ceiling and saw a small hole in the corner.

“What are you doing, Ganelon?”

Roland asked without fear in a dignified manner. He understood his fate.

“You failed to defeat the rebels and shamelessly came to the King's Capital. It is my duty to punish such a small individual.”

As he said that, a jar of yellow, buzzing insects appeared through the small hole, their wings flapping wildly. One after another, they flew into the room. Though they were no larger than an adult thumb, there were dozens, hundreds of them, flying from the ceiling. They covered the wall, filling the room with a humming noise.

“... Bees.”

“The Bee Prison. It is Marquis Greast's idea.”

Ganelon's voice seemed joyful from beneath the hole.

“Goodbye, Strongest Knight.”

His voice stopped there.

Roland, standing in the center of the room, was crowded by bees from all directions.

The next day, Ganelon poured poisonous smoke into the rooms at daybreak. The bees were wiped out.

Upon his orders, a man opened the door. The man screamed involuntarily, petrified with terror, and fell over. He gazed into the room, tears in his eyes.

Roland stood upright in the center of the room with his eye on the door. His whole body had been stung by bees all over and was red and swollen, giving him a strangely distorted figure.

The man thought it impossible. He had seen many men sentenced to the prison of bees. They all lay crouched on the floor without exception. They died while protecting their face. That action was natural. When attacked by bees, their bodies would bend over as they were stabbed by several hundred needles.

After a time surpassing a count of fifty, the man regained his composure. Though he was still frightened, he stood up and set foot through the door. He crushed many bees as he walked closer to confirm Roland's death.

Roland died standing.

When news of Roland's death reached him, Duke Thenardier became enraged at first. It was the same as

when he had lost his son. He quickly walked through the corridor to visit Duke Ganelon.

“What are you thinking?”

Without bothering with a greeting, in the first place, any greeting between the two would only be filled with sarcasm, Thenardier glared at Ganelon.

Though not as much as Roland, Thenardier also had a muscular body. The two staring at each other looked like an adult and child glaring at one another.

“What are you talking about?”

Ganelon fixed his hat and spoke as if he knew nothing.

“Roland is dead. Why did you kill him?”

For Thenardier, it was a gross miscalculation. He had sent Roland and the Navarre Knights out. Once they defeated the Zhcted Army, he intended to have them guard the western border.

There were no signs of truce, and negotiations still had a long way to go. Many of the nobles supporting Thenardier had territories in the west.

“Sachstein and Asvarre will become more bold now.”

In the worst case, Sachstein and Asvarre would cooperate after confirming Roland's death and would send troops.

However, Ganelon's reaction was not what he expected.

“It was unavoidable. Roland did not fulfill his duties.”

“So why did you kill him!”

Thenardier shouted indignantly. He could not understand Ganelon's behavior.

Thenardier also threatened and killed many, but he did so with judgment. At least, he would not give such a severe punishment to people with value.

If it were him, he would still have use for Roland. Even if he had not defeated Tigre, his value had not decreased significantly.

However, Ganelon laughed as if parrying Thenardier's anger.

“Did you want to kill him some other way?”

Epilogue

During a desolate winter day covered with gray clouds, while Tigre was waiting for Roland's return, a soldier visited Tigre and the others.

“I have come on behalf of the Vanadis, Alexandra-sama.”

After saying that, the soldier presented a letter to Ellen. She read it in silence.

Ellen sank into silence and had a sour face all day. Though Tigre spoke to her several times, she only responded vaguely.

The next day, Ellen spoke to Tigre.

“Shall we go for a ride?”

“Around here?”

Tigre asked her on a whim, but he noticed Ellen look at him with a startled face. Though the Vanadis looked at him with a smile, her pupils were serious.

At this time, Roland had not yet arrived at the King's Capital, and no one knew what would happen to him. Tigre and Ellen, to the best of their abilities, were holding the surroundings and grasping the movements of those around them.

“No... I understand. I needed a way to distract myself anyway.”

Tigre and Ellen took a horse and left the camp.

How far had they run on their horses? In Territoire, there were many large meadows, and the scenery scarcely changed. They could only see forests and mountains far into the distance.

While looking at the gray sky, Tigre vaguely thought about where they were going. Surprisingly, Ellen looked back at him as he was thinking. Though he was surprised, he swallowed any words he had after seeing Ellen's expression.

Her face was dark and gloomy, as if she was brooding over something.

“... Tigre.”

Ellen called Tigre's name as she looked away. Twice, Ellen called out to him. Tigre simply waited patiently.

Tigre knew Ellen. She was the Vanadis, Eleanora Viltaria; she would speak what was on her mind. Though they had only known each other for half a year, Tigre understood.

After the third time, Ellen did not look away. She opened her mouth while she looked at Tigre, as if enduring something. Suddenly, she let out her words.

“... Just this once, may I return to Zhcted?”

Because they had traveled so far before she spoke to Tigre, he had prepared himself. It was not that he was not surprised. He simply could not react immediately upon hearing her words.

Anxiety, unrest, and dismay violently swelled within him. Emotional words almost left Tigre's mouth; he had nearly lost his control.

Arifal remained at Ellen's waist. It blew a wind toward Tigre's face, as if it were waiting for him to react, given the timing. Rather than words, he sneezed.

He could not understand the intent of the Silver Flash. It may have been its usual mischief, or it may have been supporting Ellen. Still, Tigre was able to regain his composure because of it.

He rubbed his red hair and frowned. Zhcted was a considerable distance away, and it would not be possible to arrive at the border so easily. The distance was beyond Tigre's imagination. It would take time.

Ellen understood that more than anyone.

Although she was worried, she had called out to him. Still, he was hesitant to respond.

--- In other words, it must be a difficult matter.

When he thought calmly, many things came to his mind. It would take more than a month to even get there, and it was likely not an issue which would be resolved in two or three days.

Even if it did not take that long, she would be gone for at least two moons. Furthermore, without her lead, the main force amongst Tigre's troops, the Zhcted Army, may very well collapse in that time.

He continued to think, tearing his hair out in the meanwhile.

--- *But...*

He only made it this far because he cooperated with Ellen. Without her, he would not have been able to leave LeitMeritz, he would not have stopped the Thenardier Army from burning down Alsace. He probably would have learned of it from a rumor after the fact.

He took a deep breath and stood firmly. Ellen could tell at a glance he was ready to listen to her.

“... I hope you have a good reason.”

Ellen smiled bitterly. Tears could be seen at the edge of her eyes.

“There are two territories bordering LeitMeritz. One is led by Ludmira, who you know. The other is controlled by Sasha... Alexandra, my benefactor and best friend.”

They first met two years ago when she had just become a Vanadis.

They got along well and talked for a long time at their meeting. Ellen learned many things from Sasha.

“There is a Vanadis invading Legnica, the territory Sasha governs. I wish to defend her.”

Tigre frowned. He did not know what to say to Ellen. He only knew she wished to fight for the Vanadis known as Sasha.

Seeing Tigre's expression, Ellen bowed her head bitterly.

“Soon after I met her, Sasha's illness became more severe. When I saw her last summer, she was barely able to walk on her own. Though I say that, Sasha's ^{Viralt} Dragonic Tool is not one that decides its master by power. Even though she does not have the strength to defend...”

Tigre remembered their conversation during their battles at the Tatra Mountains.

--- I see. If she did not have her Dragonic Tool, she would no longer be a Vanadis...

Even if she was ill, she was still required to continue with her duties as a Vanadis, so long as it did not part from her.

“We swore to each other. Should crisis visit either of us , we would abandon anything we were doing and would rush to give aid.”

It was a sacred oath between two people which could never be forgotten.

“--- I understand.”

Tigre slowly, but firmly, nodded.

“I will somehow manage while you're away.”

If they had not ridden separate horses, Ellen may have clung to Tigre. She would have concealed her face which was on the verge of tears. It took all her will to force down her emotions.

“Thank you, Tigre. Really... Thank you.”

One thousand soldiers, including Rurick, were left behind with Tigre. Ellen and Lim left with the remaining soldiers for their native land together with Sophie.

“Lord Tigrevurmud. We will meet again.”

While holding the young Dragon, Lunie, the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower ^{Presuyet} smiled gently, even while understanding Tigre's predicament. She really was optimistic.

“With the Zhcted Army gone, the Knights of Brune will be your allies for a short time. Please bear with it. I also wish to speak to you much more.”

“Thank you. We will meet again.”

Tigre grasped Sophie's hand with a smile. Though he had accidentally touched Lunie's head, the young Dragon simply felt ticklish.

Lim, as usual, was more indifferent.

“Eleanora-sama and I will return in no time. Until then, please refrain from being so reckless.”

Her expression and voice was as usual, but she held Tigre's hand strongly enough that he felt pain. Tigre bore with the pain, as if he had not noticed it at all. She did not let go of his hand until Ellen, who was staring at them, put in a word.

Tigre understood the pain she felt quite literally.

After seeing them off, Tigre spoke to Rurick.

“Why did you remain here?”

The bald Knight laughed as though it were natural when he responded.

“It is warmer during winter in Brune than our country. Without hair, my head is quite sensitive.”

Ellen told the soldiers they would return to Zhcted and up to one thousand would be chosen to remain with Tigre.

The soldiers from Brune were also approximately one thousand in number; Massas took command of them.

Several days after reorganizing the troops, news of Roland's death reached Tigre.

“Roland is...?”

It was unbelievable. Such a strong Knight had died outside the battlefield.

His surprise was ended early, however, when more bad news was brought to him.

[The Muozinel Army, approximately twenty thousand strong, have crossed the southeastern border. We request reinforcements immediately.]

It was different from the Zhcted Army Ellen led. An invader in the truest sense had appeared.

The winter of Brune Kingdom was wrapped in yet another war.

